A One-Shot Light Novel

Until the Moon Stops Falling

An apocalyptic josei yuri story set in Niigata, Japan about stubbornness, survival, and the love that grows between two girls at the end of the world.

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&
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Before I — The Kitchen

(Shirase)

I want to tell you about the kitchen.

I have told you about my mother in pieces. I have said she was a drinker. I have said my father left when I was four. I have said she became small. I have not told you about the kitchen, because the kitchen is the part that matters, and the parts that matter are the hardest to say.

The kitchen was small.

The kitchen was small in the way that kitchens in subsidized housing in Niigata in the late 2000s were small — a counter, a sink, a two-burner gas stove, a refrigerator that hummed. The linoleum was green. The wallpaper was yellow, originally, but had gone the color of old paper. There was a window over the sink that looked out onto a concrete courtyard and, beyond the courtyard, the back of another building just like ours. The window did not open. I do not know why. It just did not.

The kitchen was where my mother lived.

She did not live in the living room. She did not live in the bedroom. She did not live anywhere else in the apartment. She lived in the kitchen, at the table, with a bottle of shochu and a cigarette and the television on very low. She lived there the way a person lives in a harbor — she went out, sometimes, to work, to the store, to wherever she went when she was not at the table, and she came back to the kitchen, and she sat down, and she was home.

I did not understand this when I was small.

I did not understand why the kitchen was where she wanted to be. The kitchen was where the work was. The kitchen was where you cooked, where you cleaned, where you washed the dishes, where you took out the trash. The kitchen was the room with the chores in it. Why would anyone want to be in the room with the chores?

I understood later.

I understood when I was eight, and I had learned to cook, and I was standing at the stove making miso soup for dinner, and my mother was at the table behind me with her shochu, and she was watching me cook, and she said, very quietly, almost to herself, *you're better at this than I ever was.*

She was not being kind. She was not being cruel. She was being — she was being accurate. She was stating a fact, the way you state a fact about the weather. *It is raining. You are better at this than I ever was.* The same tone. The same flatness.

I did not say anything. I stirred the miso. I did not know what to say. I was eight. I did not know that the correct thing to say was *that's not true, Mom, you're great*, because it was not true and she was not great, and I had already learned, by eight, that the correct thing to say was usually a lie, and I had already decided, by eight, that I was not going to say the lies.

I stirred the miso. I served it. I sat down across from her. We ate. She drank. The television was on very low. The window did not open. The linoleum was green.

This is the kitchen I grew up in.

This is the kitchen where I learned everything I know.

I learned to cook in that kitchen. I learned to make rice — first in the rice cooker, which was easy, and then on the stove, which was harder, and which I had to learn when the rice cooker broke and my mother did not buy a new one for three months. I learned to make miso soup. I learned to make tamagoyaki, badly at first, then well. I learned to fry fish. I learned to cut vegetables, the way the women on the morning shows cut vegetables, with the knife held just so, with the fingers curled back, with the motion coming from the shoulder, not the wrist. I learned to wash dishes. I learned to scrub the pot. I learned to clean the stove. I learned to take out the trash.

I learned these things because nobody else was going to do them.

I learned these things because if I did not do them, they did not get done.

I learned these things because my mother was at the table with her shochu, and the kitchen was my responsibility by the time I was eight, and I did not know that this was unusual, because I did not have friends whose kitchens I could compare mine to, because I did not have friends.

I did not have friends because — I do not know why. I did not have friends because I was quiet. I did not have friends because I was the kid who smelled like shochu and cigarettes, because my mother's clothes smelled like shochu and cigarettes, and the smell got into everything, and the other kids could smell it, and they did not want to sit next to me. I did not have friends because I was angry, in the way that quiet children are angry, which is to say invisibly, which is to say all the time. I did not have

friends because I did not know how to have friends, because nobody had taught me, because my mother was at the table with her shochu and the television on very low.

I had books instead.

I had books, and then I had manga, and then I had anime, and these things were my friends. These things did not smell me. These things did not move away when I sat down. These things did not ask me questions I could not answer. These things just — were there. On the page. On the screen. Doing the things they did. Being the people they were. I could watch them for hours. I did watch them for hours. I watched them in my room, on the floor, with the door closed, while my mother was in the kitchen with her shochu and the television on very low.

I did not know, then, that this was the beginning of the rest of my life.

I did not know that the books and the manga and the anime were going to be the things that saved me. I did not know that they were going to be the things that kept me alive, that kept me going, that gave me something to be when there was nothing else to be. I did not know that the quiet angry kid on the floor with the book was going to grow up into the quiet angry woman on the park bench with the dead eyes, and that the books and the manga and the anime were going to be the bridge between the two.

I did not know any of that.

I just read.

I read everything. I read the books in the school library. I read the

books in the public library, the one in Bandai, the one with the carpet that smelled like dust and the heating that was too high in winter. I read the manga in the convenience store, standing in the aisle, flipping through, until the clerk told me to buy it or leave. I read the anime on the television, on the channel that ran reruns at 2 AM, when my mother was asleep and the apartment was quiet and the only light in the kitchen was the light from the television and the ember of her last cigarette.

I read because reading was the only thing that did not require me to be somewhere else.

I read because reading was the only thing that did not require me to be someone else.

I read because in the books, the kids had friends. In the books, the kids had mothers who were not at the table with the shochu. In the books, the kids had kitchens that were not theirs to clean. In the books, the kids were — okay. The kids were okay. The kids were not me, and that was the point, and that was why I read.

I was eight.

I was eight, and I was making miso soup in the kitchen, and my mother was at the table behind me, and she was saying *you're better at this than I ever was*, and I was stirring the miso and not saying anything, and the television was on very low, and the window did not open, and the linoleum was green.

That was the kitchen.

That was the beginning.

Everything else came after.

Before II — The Cat Card

(Shirase)

I want to tell you about the cat card.

My father sent one birthday card. One. In my entire life. I was seven. It arrived in the mailbox on a Tuesday in November, three days after my birthday, in a plain white envelope with no return address. The postmark was from Yokohama. My mother put it on the kitchen table next to her shochu and looked at it for a long time without opening it.

She did not open it for two days.

I did not open it either. I did not know whose it was. I thought maybe it was a bill. I thought maybe it was something for my mother. I did not think it was for me, because nothing came for me, because nobody knew I existed outside of the apartment and the school and the library, and nobody who knew I existed would send me a card.

On the third day my mother handed it to me. She did not say anything. She just — handed it to me, across the table, the way you hand someone a chopstick. I took it. I turned it over. My name was on it. *To Fukuoka Shirase.* In handwriting I did not recognize.

I opened it.

The card had a cat on it. A cartoon cat. Orange. Sitting on a fence. Smiling. The smiling was wrong — the cat's mouth was curved up but the eyes were not smiling, the eyes were just dots, and the dots did not match the mouth, and the cat looked like it was performing happiness instead of

feeling it. I would learn, later, that this was how all cartoon cats looked. I would learn, later, that this was how a lot of people looked.

Inside the card, in the same handwriting, was written:

Happy birthday, Shirase. I'm sorry I'm not there. I think about you. — Dad

That was all.

No *I love you.* No *I'll come visit.* No *here's my number, here's my address, here's how you can find me.* Just *I think about you.* Just *I'm sorry I'm not there.* Just *Dad.*

I did not know what to do with it.

I was seven. I did not know my father. I did not remember him. I had been told, by my mother, in the flat voice she used for facts about him, that he had *left*, that he had *gone to Yokohama*, that he had *another family now.* I had been told this the way I was told the weather. I had filed it in the same place in my head. *It is raining. Your father has another family now.* The same tone. The same flatness.

I had not thought about him much. I had thought about him the way I thought about the weather — as a thing that happened, that I had no control over, that I did not need to understand. He was gone. He was in Yokohama. He had another family. These were facts. Facts did not require feelings.

But the card.

The card required feelings.

The card sat on the kitchen table for a week after I opened it. I did not

put it away. I did not throw it out. I did not look at it. I just — let it sit there. My mother did not move it either. The card sat on the kitchen table next to her shochu and her cigarettes and the remote control, and it became part of the kitchen, the way everything in the kitchen became part of the kitchen. It accumulated a thin layer of ash. The corner curled from the humidity.

I looked at it sometimes.

I looked at it when my mother was not looking. I would stand at the counter, pretending to wash dishes, and I would look at the card out of the corner of my eye, and I would think about the cat. The cat with the smiling mouth and the not-smiling eyes. I would think about the handwriting. I would think about the words. *I think about you.* I would think about what it meant. Did it mean he thought about me sometimes? Did it mean he thought about me often? Did it mean he thought about me the way I thought about the weather — as a thing that had happened, that he had no control over, that he did not need to understand?

I did not know.

I was seven.

I did not know how to ask.

I put the card in a drawer. The drawer in my room, the one with the socks and the underwear and the few things that were mine. I put it under the socks. I did not look at it again for a long time.

I looked at it again when I was twelve.

I was twelve. I had just learned to forge my mother's signature. I had

just — I had just had a bad week. A bad month. A bad year. I had just had the year where I understood, finally, fully, that my mother was not going to get better, that the kitchen was going to be the kitchen forever, that the shochu was going to be the shochu forever, that the television was going to be on very low forever, that this was — this was it. This was my life. This was going to be my life.

I was twelve, and I was in my room, and I was looking for a sock, and I found the card.

I sat down on the floor with the card in my lap. I looked at the cat. The cat had not changed. The cat was still orange. Still on the fence. Still smiling with the mouth and not the eyes. The ash was still on it, a thin grey film, the ash of cigarettes my mother had smoked five years ago. The corner was still curled.

I opened it.

Happy birthday, Shirase. I'm sorry I'm not there. I think about you. — Dad

I read it three times.

Then I did something I had not done in a long time. I cried. I cried in my room, on the floor, with the card in my lap, and I cried the way I had not cried since I was small — the ugly kind, the loud kind, the kind that comes from the stomach. I cried for — I do not know how long. An hour. Maybe longer. I cried until I was empty.

Then I stopped.

Then I put the card back in the drawer.

Then I went to the kitchen and I made dinner, and my mother was at the table with her shochu, and I served her dinner, and we ate, and the television was on very low, and the window did not open, and the linoleum was green.

I did not cry again for a long time.

I did not cry again until the park bench.

I am telling you about the cat card because — because it is the thing I kept. The cat card is the thing I have kept, through everything. Through the eleven jobs. Through the two apartments. Through the manga cafes. Through the bench. Through Akari. I have the cat card. It is in the drawer of the Tanaka house now, in Sakae, in the mountains, under my socks. It is still orange. It is still smiling with the mouth and not the eyes. The ash is still on it. The corner is still curled.

I have it because — because it is the only evidence I have that someone, somewhere, thought about me.

I do not know if my father is alive. I have not checked. I told you I would not check. I told you that checking would not help. I told you that the cat card was enough — was the only piece of him I needed — was the thing I was going to keep.

I am keeping it.

I am keeping it the way I keep everything — stubbornly, furiously, with a refusal to let the keeping make me smaller.

The cat card is mine.

The cat card has been mine for twenty years.

The cat card is going to be mine for as long as I am alive.

And I am going to be alive for a long time.

Because I am stubborn.

Because someone, somewhere, thought about me.

Even if it was only once.

Even if it was only on a card.

Even if it was only a cat with a smiling mouth and not-smiling eyes.

It was enough.

It has always been enough.

Before III — Tokyo

(Shirase)

I want to tell you about Tokyo.

I left Niigata when I was sixteen. I have told you this. I told you about the fight with my mother. I told you about the bag. I told you I walked out and did not go back. I have not told you about Tokyo, because Tokyo is the part that — Tokyo is the part where I became the person who ended up on the bench.

I should tell you about Tokyo.

I took the Shinkansen. I had forty thousand yen in cash, which I had been saving for two years from the part-time job I had at a supermarket after school, the job my mother did not know about, the job I had gotten with a forged birth certificate that said I was eighteen. Forty thousand yen was — it was not a lot. It was enough for the train ticket and a week in manga cafes and not much else. It was enough to get me to Tokyo. It was not enough to live in Tokyo.

I did not think about that.

I was sixteen. I did not think about *living in Tokyo*. I thought about *being in Tokyo*. I thought about Tokyo as a place to be, not a place to live. I thought about Tokyo the way I thought about the books — as a place where things happened, where people were okay, where I would arrive and the arriving would change me. I did not think about rent. I did not think about food. I did not think about what I would do when the forty thousand yen ran out.

I was sixteen. I was stupid. I was angry. I was — I was free, for the first time in my life, and the freedom was so big and so sudden that I could not see past it.

The Shinkansen took ninety minutes. I sat by the window. I watched Niigata fall away behind me — the rice paddies, the mountains, the coast, the city. I watched it go. I did not cry. I did not feel anything. I just — watched. I watched the way you watch a television show you are not really interested in. I watched with the flat eyes I had learned in the kitchen.

Tokyo was — Tokyo was everything I had imagined and nothing I had imagined.

Tokyo was big. Tokyo was loud. Tokyo was full of people, all of them moving, all of them going somewhere, all of them not looking at me. I had never been invisible before. In Niigata I had been the kid who smelled like shochu. In Tokyo I was nobody. I was a sixteen-year-old girl with a bag and forty thousand yen and nobody knew I existed and nobody cared.

This was — this was the best feeling I had ever had.

I stood in Tokyo Station at 11 AM on a Wednesday in March and I felt, for the first time in my life, like I could breathe. The air was bad. The air was full of diesel and concrete and the breath of a million people. But the air was — the air was free. The air was not the air of the kitchen. The air was not the air of the apartment. The air was the air of a place where nobody knew me, and where nobody was going to sit at a table with a bottle of shochu and a cigarette and watch me cook.

I breathed.

I walked out of the station. I walked into Tokyo. I did not know where I was going. I just walked. I walked through Marunouchi. I walked through Ginza. I walked through Yurakucho, under the train tracks, past the yakitori stalls that were just opening for lunch. I walked until my feet hurt. I walked until the forty thousand yen in my pocket felt like a real and limited thing.

I found a manga cafe in Ikebukuro.

The manga cafe was called *Media Cafe Popeye*. It was on the second floor of a building above a ramen shop. It was open twenty-four hours. It cost twelve hundred yen for five hours, or two thousand yen for a night pack, which was 10 PM to 8 AM. I did the math. I could afford the night pack for twenty nights, if I did not eat. I could not afford to not eat.

I bought the night pack.

I found a booth. The booth was small — a reclining chair, a desk, a computer, a shelf of manga. The booth had a door. The door locked. The booth was — the booth was mine. For ten hours, the booth was mine. I sat in the chair and I looked at the door and I felt, again, the feeling of being able to breathe.

I slept.

I had not slept in — I do not know how long. I had not slept well in months. I had not slept well since the fight with my mother had started building, the fight that was going to be the fight, the one where things got said that could not be unsaid. I had not slept. I lay in the reclining chair in the manga cafe in Ikebukuro and I slept for nine hours. I slept the way I had not slept in years. I slept like a person.

When I woke up it was morning. I went to the bathroom. I washed my face. I looked at myself in the mirror. The face that looked back at me was the face I had always had — the face that looked sixteen, that would always look sixteen, the face that strangers on the train would have opinions about. But the face was — the face was different. The face had slept. The face was in Tokyo. The face was — the face was mine, in a way it had not been mine in Niigata.

I went out.

I found a convenience store. I bought an onigiri. I ate it on the street, standing up, watching the salarymen go by. The onigiri was — it was the best onigiri I had ever eaten. Not because it was a good onigiri. It was a convenience store onigiri. It was the same onigiri I had eaten a hundred times in Niigata. But it was a Tokyo onigiri. It was an onigiri I had bought with my own money, in a city where nobody knew me, on a morning when I was free. It tasted like freedom. It tasted like — it tasted like the beginning of something.

I did not know, then, that it was the beginning of four years of misery.

I will tell you about the four years.

I will tell you because — because the four years are the part of me that I do not regret, and that I need you to understand, because if you do not understand the four years you will not understand the bench.

The first job was at a convenience store in Ikebukuro. The same chain as the one I had worked at in Niigata. I knew the register. I knew the stock. I knew the routine. I got the job on the second day, with the forged birth certificate that said I was eighteen. The manager did not look at the

certificate closely. The manager needed a body. I was a body. I was hired.

I lost the job in three weeks.

I lost it because I was late. I was late because I was sleeping in manga cafes, and manga cafes do not have alarms, and I overslept, twice, three times, four times. The manager — a woman in her forties, tired, not unkind — said *I'm sorry, Shirase, but I can't keep you if you can't be on time.* I said *I understand.* She said *good luck.* I said *thank you.*

I went back to the manga cafe.

I found the second job at a different convenience store, in Takadanobaba, two stations away. I got the job on the fourth day. The manager was a man in his fifties. He looked at the forged certificate. He looked at me. He said *you're not eighteen.* I said *I am.* He said *you're sixteen.* I said *I'm eighteen.* He said *I'm going to hire you anyway, because I need a body, but if you're late I will fire you, and if you lie to me about anything else I will fire you, and if you steal I will call the police.* I said *okay.* He hired me.

I kept that job for six weeks.

I lost it because of the creep.

The creep was a customer. A salaryman, forties, married — I knew he was married because he wore a ring. He came in every evening at 7 PM. He bought a bento and a beer. He stood at the register and he looked at me. He looked at me in the way that men look at sixteen-year-old girls who look sixteen, which is to say: too long, too carefully, with too much attention to the wrong parts. I did not say anything. I did not know what to say. I was sixteen. I had not learned, yet, that the correct response to a

salaryman's opinion was to look him dead in the eye until he remembered he had somewhere else to be.

The creep escalated. The creep started — started talking to me. Started asking me questions. *What's your name. Where do you live. Do you have a boyfriend. Do you want to get a coffee sometime.* I did not answer. I scanned his bento. I scanned his beer. I took his money. I gave him his change. I did not look at him.

One evening he came in at 7 PM and he — he reached across the register and he touched my hair. He touched my hair and he said *you're so pretty, Shirase-chan, you should be a model, not a conbini girl.* He said it in a voice that was — that was meant to be flattering. That was meant to be a compliment. That was — that was a violation. I was sixteen. I was at work. I was at the register. He reached across the register and he touched my hair.

I hit him.

I did not hit him hard. I hit him with the side of the scanner, the part you scan barcodes with, the part that was in my hand because I had been scanning his bento. I hit him in the face. He went down. He went down hard. He hit the floor. His bento went everywhere. His beer broke. There was — there was a mess. There was a salaryman on the floor of a convenience store in Takadanobaba with a broken nose and rice in his hair.

The manager fired me.

He did not fire me for hitting the creep. He fired me for hitting the creep *in front of customers*. There had been three other customers in the

store. They had seen. They had — they had been upset. They had complained. The manager said *I told you, if you do anything, I fire you.* I said *he touched me.* The manager said *I know. I'm sorry. But I can't have you hitting customers.* I said *he touched me.* The manager said *I know. I'm sorry. Good luck.*

I went back to the manga cafe.

I tell you this because — because the second job is where I learned the thing that has stayed with me. The thing I learned is: when a man touches you, hit him. Hit him hard. Hit him in the face if you can. Do not wait. Do not be polite. Do not — do not let him finish. Hit him. The consequences will come, and the consequences will be unfair, and the consequences will be yours to carry. But hit him. Because if you do not hit him, he will touch you again, and again, and again, and the touching will — the touching will eat you. The touching will eat you from the inside. The touching is — the touching is the thing that turns a person into a nothing. Hit him. Even if you get fired. Even if you get arrested. Hit him. Stay a person.

I am aware that this is — that this is not the kind of advice that light novel protagonists usually give. Light novel protagonists usually — usually learn to forgive. Light novel protagonists usually learn that violence is not the answer. Light novel protagonists usually — I am not a light novel protagonist. I am a woman who has been touched by men who should not have touched her, and I am telling you: hit them. Stay a person.

I hit the creep.

I got fired.

I do not regret it.

I have never regretted it.

I will never regret it.

It was a stepping stone.

It was — it was one of the stones I crossed the river on.

Before IV — The Eleven

(Shirase)

I want to tell you about the eleven jobs.

I have told you about the first two. I have told you about the convenience store in Ikebukuro and the convenience store in Takadanobaba and the salaryman with the broken nose. I have not told you about the other nine. I am going to tell you about the other nine now, because the other nine are — the other nine are the rest of the stepping stones, and if I do not tell you about them you will not understand how I got from Tokyo to the bench.

I will tell you about them quickly. I will not — I will not give each of them a chapter. Each of them does not deserve a chapter. They are jobs. They are the things I did to keep myself alive, in the four years between sixteen and twenty, in Tokyo, in the small life I built there. They are not — they are not stories, exactly. They are — they are the things that happened to me while I was trying to be a person.

I will tell you about them anyway.

Job three was at a family restaurant in Shinjuku. I was a waitress. I kept it for two months. I lost it because I told a customer, accurately, that he was being a creep to the high school girl at the next table. The customer complained. The manager sided with the customer. The high school girl — I found out later — had been crying in the bathroom for twenty minutes. Nobody checked on her. Nobody but me. I got fired for checking on her.

Job four was at a bookstore in Jimbocho. I loved the bookstore. The bookstore was — the bookstore was three floors of used books, all of them old, all of them smelling like dust and paper and the particular smell of books that have been read by many people. I worked the register. I shelved books. I read books on my break, in the back, sitting on the floor between the philosophy and the religion sections, with a book in my lap and the dust in the air. I kept the job for four months. I lost it because the bookstore closed. The owner — an old man, eighty years old, who had run the bookstore for fifty years — had decided to retire. He had not found a buyer. He closed the store. On the last day he gave me a book. *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*. He said *this is the first story about the moon. Read it*. I read it. I still have it. It is in the drawer in the Tanaka house, next to the cat card.

Job five was at a supermarket in Nerima. Night shift. Stocking shelves. I was good at it. I am still good at it. I kept the job for five months. I lost it because the manager — a man in his forties, married, two kids — made a pass at me in the break room at 2 AM. He backed me into the corner. He put his hand on my hip. He said *come on, Shirase, you know you want this*. I broke his nose. I told you about this already. I tell you about it again because — because it is the one I think about. It is the one I think about because I broke his nose *better* the second time. The first time, with the salaryman, had been a panicky swing. The second time, with the manager, was — was a decision. I looked at him. I saw his hand on my hip. I decided. I broke his nose. I broke it cleanly, with the heel of my palm, the way they teach you in self-defense classes that I had not taken but that I had read about in a manga. He went down. I walked out. I did not go back.

Job six was at a logistics warehouse in Ota. Night shift. Unloading

containers. I was — I was good at this too. The containers were heavy. The containers were stubborn. The containers did not talk to me. I respected the containers. I kept the job for three months. I lost it because the company restructured and laid off the night shift.

Job seven was at a call center in Shibuya. I lasted two weeks. I am not — I am not a phone person. I am not a person who can be polite to strangers on the phone for eight hours a day. I told a customer, on the second week, to — I will not tell you what I told the customer. It was not polite. I was fired. I do not regret it. The customer deserved it.

Job eight was at a pachinko parlor in Ueno. I was a floor attendant. I cleared balls. I cleaned machines. I watched people lose money for eight hours a day. I kept the job for six weeks. I lost it because I told a customer, accurately, that he was gambling away his family's rent money and that he should go home. The customer complained. The manager sided with the customer. The customer's wife — I found out later — had come into the parlor the next day looking for him. She had been crying. Nobody had helped her.

Job nine was at a bakery in Kichijoji. I loved the bakery. The bakery was — the bakery was the closest thing I had to a home, in Tokyo. The owner was a woman in her sixties. She was kind. She taught me to bake bread. She taught me to make melon pan. She — she was the first person, since my mother, who had taught me anything. I kept the job for seven months. I lost it because — because the owner got sick. Cancer. She closed the bakery. She went to the hospital. She — I do not know if she is alive. I did not check. I tell myself she is alive. I tell myself she is alive and that she is okay and that she is — that she is somewhere, being kind, the

way she was kind to me. I do not know. I have not checked.

Job ten was at a konbini again. I do not remember which one. They blur. I kept it for a month. I lost it because I overslept. I had been sleeping in manga cafes again. I had not been sleeping well. I overslept. I was late. I was fired.

Job eleven was at a factory in Sumida. Day shift. Assembling — I do not remember what we were assembling. Small plastic parts. Something for cars. I kept the job for two months. I lost it because I got sick. I got sick because I had not been eating. I had not been eating because I had not been paid. I had not been paid because the company was — was sketchy, was the kind of company that does not pay its workers on time, was the kind of company that hires sixteen-year-olds with forged certificates and does not ask questions. I got sick. I missed three days. I was fired.

Eleven jobs.

Eleven jobs in four years.

I tell you about them because — because the eleven jobs are the reason I am the person I am. The eleven jobs are the reason I am stubborn. The eleven jobs are the reason I know — I know in my bones — that the world is not going to save me. The world has had eleven chances to save me. The world has not saved me. The world is not going to save me. I am going to save me.

I am going to save me the way I have always saved me — by getting up. By going to the next job. By eating the next onigiri. By sleeping in the next manga cafe. By — by being too angry at the universe to stay down.

This is what I learned in Tokyo.

This is what the eleven jobs taught me.

The eleven jobs taught me that I am — that I am alone. That I have always been alone. That I will always be alone. That the only person who is going to keep me alive is me. That the only person who is going to fight for me is me. That the only person who is going to — who is going to be there, at 2 AM, in the manga cafe, on the floor, with the nothing in my eyes — the only person who is going to be there is me.

I learned this.

I learned it well.

I learned it so well that when I met Akari — when Akari sat down on the bench and gave me her cardigan and came back the next day with onigiri — I did not believe her. I did not believe she would come back. I did not believe anyone would come back. I had learned, in Tokyo, that nobody comes back. Nobody comes back. People leave. Jobs end. Bookstores close. Bakeries close. Mothers sit at the table with their shochu. Fathers send one card and disappear. Nobody comes back.

Akari came back.

Akari came back the next day. And the next. And the next.

And I did not believe her.

And I did not believe her the day after that.

And I did not believe her for — for a long time.

I did not believe her until the spring. Until the day she made me tamagoyaki and sat on the couch and waited and did not yell at me for not eating. I did not believe her until that day. I did not believe her until she — until she taught me, with her patience, with her impatience, with her being there — that some people come back.

Some people come back.

Akari comes back.

I am telling you about the eleven jobs because the eleven jobs are — the eleven jobs are the contrast. The eleven jobs are the dark against which Akari is the light. The eleven jobs are the reason — the reason that when Akari sat down on the bench, I could not — I could not believe it. I could not believe that someone was sitting down. I could not believe that someone was staying. I could not believe that the universe, after eleven jobs and a mother and a father and a salaryman and a manager and a bookstore that closed and a bakery that closed — I could not believe that the universe had sent me — me — a girl with a cardigan and a melon pan.

I could not believe it.

I did not believe it.

But Akari — Akari believed it for both of us.

Akari believed it enough for both of us.

And that — that was enough.

That was the beginning.

That was — that was the first stepping stone on the other side of the

river.

The river was Tokyo.

The river was the eleven jobs.

The river was the four years.

Akari was the other side.

I did not know it yet.

But I was — I was crossing.

Before V — The Spreadsheet

(Akari)

I want to tell you about the spreadsheet.

My mother kept a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was on her desktop, on the Mac she kept in the study, the study I was not allowed to enter without knocking. The spreadsheet was called *AKARI SCHEDULE 2025*. It was — it was exactly what it sounds like. It was a spreadsheet. Of my life. For the year 2025.

The spreadsheet had columns.

The columns were: *Date*. *School*. *Cram School*. *Extracurricular*. *Meal Plan*. *Sleep Target*. *Notes*.

The spreadsheet had rows.

The rows were days. Three hundred and sixty-five rows. One for each day of the year. Each row was filled in. Each row had — had a plan. A specific plan. A plan that said: at this time, on this day, you will be doing this. At 7 AM, you will wake up. At 7:15, you will eat breakfast — the breakfast specified in the Meal Plan column, which was always *miso*, *rice*, *fish*, *egg*, because my mother believed in traditional breakfasts. At 7:45, you will leave for school. At 8:15, you will arrive at school. At 8:30, your first class will begin. And so on. And so on. For three hundred and sixty-five days.

I found the spreadsheet when I was twelve.

I was not supposed to find it. I was looking for a printer. I needed to

print a homework assignment. My mother was not home. I went into the study. I turned on the Mac. The spreadsheet was open on the desktop. It was the only thing on the desktop. My mother's desktop was — was clean. My mother's desktop had one icon. The spreadsheet.

I looked at it.

I looked at it for a long time.

I read every row. I read every column. I read every note. The notes were — the notes were things like *parent-teacher conference*, *attend* and *mock exam*, *score target 90+* and *Saturday: dinner with Tanaka-san*, *dress appropriately* and *Sunday: rest (light review only)*. The notes were — the notes were my life. My life, planned out, in twelve-point Times New Roman, by someone who was not me.

I did not cry.

I was twelve. I did not cry at things. I had learned, by twelve, that crying in my mother's house was — was not useful. Crying did not change the spreadsheet. Crying did not change anything. Crying was just — water, on the face, that you had to clean up afterward. I had learned, by twelve, to not cry. I had learned to — to hold it. To hold the whatever-it-was, in my chest, behind my ribs, in the place where crying came from. To hold it there. To not let it out. To not let it become water.

I held it.

I closed the spreadsheet. I printed my homework. I turned off the Mac. I left the study. I went to my room. I did my homework. I ate dinner — the dinner my mother had left for me in the refrigerator, labeled, with

reheating instructions, because my mother was at the office until 10 PM, because my mother was always at the office until 10 PM. I went to bed. I lay in the dark. I held it.

I held it for four years.

I tell you about the spreadsheet because — because the spreadsheet is the thing. The spreadsheet is — the spreadsheet is the shape of my childhood. The spreadsheet is the reason I am the person I am. The spreadsheet is the reason I dyed my hair. The spreadsheet is the reason I wear jirai kei. The spreadsheet is the reason I do my nails. The spreadsheet is the reason I am — the way I am.

I will explain.

My mother — Sakai Reiko, partner at Mori, Sakai & Yamada Corporate Law, graduate of Tokyo University Law, graduate of Harvard LLM, the most decorated female lawyer in Niigata Prefecture, the woman who had been on the cover of *Nikkei Woman* twice, the woman who had been profiled in *Forbes Japan*, the woman who had — who had done everything right, everything correctly, everything on time, everything in order — my mother had decided, when I was born, that I was going to do everything right too.

She had decided this the way she decided everything — with a spreadsheet.

The first spreadsheet was *AKARI SCHEDULE 2010*. I was one year old. The spreadsheet had — I do not know what it had. I never saw it. I know it existed because my mother mentioned it once, offhand, when I was fourteen, in a conversation about — about something else, about some

other spreadsheet, about some other plan. She said *I've been scheduling you since you were one. You turned out fine.*

I turned out fine.

That was — that was the standard. That was the metric. *Fine.* Not *happy.* Not *loved.* Not *okay.* Fine. I was — I was fine. I was a fine daughter. I had fine grades. I went to a fine school. I would go to a fine university. I would have a fine career. I would be — fine.

I did not want to be fine.

I did not know, at twelve, what I wanted to be. I did not know, at twelve, that *wanting to be* was a thing. I had not — I had not been taught that wanting was a thing. I had been taught that being was a thing. Being what the spreadsheet said. Being where the spreadsheet said. Being when the spreadsheet said. I had been taught to be. I had not been taught to want.

I learned to want at thirteen.

I learned to want at thirteen because — because of a manga.

I have not told you about the manga yet. I will tell you about the manga now.

The manga was *Bloom Into You.* Volume one. I found it at a bookstore in Tokyo, on a school trip, in the spring of 2022. I was thirteen. I was — I was supposed to be shopping for school supplies. My mother had given me ten thousand yen for school supplies. I was supposed to buy notebooks, pens, a new pencil case. I was supposed to buy the things on the list. The list was in my bag. The list was — the list was a spreadsheet,

basically. A smaller version. A version for a shopping trip.

I did not buy the things on the list.

I bought the manga.

I do not know why. I do not know why I picked it up. I was in the manga aisle. I had not — I had not been in a manga aisle before. My mother did not allow manga in the house. My mother considered manga — my mother considered manga *distracting*. My mother considered anything that was not on the spreadsheet *distracting*. I had not read manga. I had not — I had not been allowed to read manga.

But I was in the manga aisle. I was — I was thirteen, and I was alone, in Tokyo, with ten thousand yen, and nobody was watching, and I wandered into the manga aisle. And I saw — I saw the cover. The cover had two girls on it. The two girls were — were standing close. One was looking at the other. The other was looking away. The cover was — the cover was simple. The cover was — the cover was the most interesting thing I had ever seen.

I picked it up.

I read the first page, standing in the aisle. I read the second page. I read the third. I read — I read the whole volume, standing in the aisle, in the bookstore in Tokyo, on a school trip, in the spring of 2022, when I was thirteen years old. I read it in about forty minutes. I did not move. I do not think I breathed.

I bought it.

I hid it in my school bag, under the notebooks and the pens and the

pencil case that I also bought, because I was — I was a good girl. I was the girl on the spreadsheet. I bought the things on the list. I also bought the manga. I hid the manga under the things on the list.

I took it home. I hid it under my mattress. I read it at night, with a flashlight, after my mother went to bed. I read it seven times in the first week. I read it until the spine cracked. I read it until I had memorized pages.

I read it and I felt — I felt a thing.

The thing I felt was — I did not have a word for it. I was thirteen. I did not have words for most of what I felt. I had not been taught words for what I felt. I had been taught words for *fine*. I had been taught words for *excellent*. I had been taught words for *according to plan*. I had not been taught words for the thing I felt when I read *Bloom Into You*.

The thing I felt was — recognition.

The thing I felt was — *oh. Oh. This. This is a thing. This is — this is me. This is — this is what I am. This is what I have been. This is what I have been, and I did not know, and now I know, and — and knowing is — knowing is a thing. Knowing is — knowing is the thing. Knowing is the first thing. Knowing is — knowing is the beginning.*

I was thirteen.

I was thirteen, and I was reading a yuri manga under my mattress with a flashlight, and I was — I was finding out. I was finding out a thing about myself. The thing I was finding out was — was that I liked girls. The thing I was finding out was — was that I liked girls the way the girls in the manga

liked girls. The thing I was finding out was — was that I was — was that I was — was that I was a girl who liked girls.

I did not have the word *yuri* yet. I did not have the word *lesbian*. I did not have any of the words. I had — I had the manga. I had the feeling. I had the recognition. I had the — the *oh*.

That was enough.

That was — that was the beginning.

That was the beginning of me.

Not the beginning of my life — my life had begun thirteen years before, in a hospital in Niigata, to a mother who had already made a spreadsheet for me. But the beginning of — of me. Of the me that — that wanted. Of the me that — that was not on the spreadsheet. Of the me that — that hid manga under my mattress and read it with a flashlight and felt the *oh*.

That me — that me was born in a bookstore in Tokyo, in the spring of 2022, when I was thirteen years old, holding a copy of *Bloom Into You* volume one.

That me — that me is the me that matters.

That me — that me is the me that ended up on the park bench at one in the morning, eighteen months later, because — because I could not — I could not be the me on the spreadsheet anymore. I could not be the fine daughter. I could not be the girl who went to Tokyo University and studied law and took over the firm. I could not. I could not. I could not.

I had to be — the me that had read the manga. The me that had felt the *oh*. The me that — that wanted.

I did not know what I wanted.

I did not know — I did not know what wanting looked like, in practice. I did not know — I did not know how to be a person who wanted things. I had not been taught. I had been taught to be. I had not been taught to want.

I was — I was going to learn.

I was going to learn by — by doing things. By — by dyeing my hair. By wearing jirai kei. By doing my nails. By — by doing the things that were not on the spreadsheet. By — by being the me that was not on the spreadsheet. By — by being the me that wanted.

I tell you this because — because the spreadsheet is the contrast. The spreadsheet is the dark. The spreadsheet is the thing I was running from, the thing I was — was refusing, the thing I was — was too stubborn to be.

The spreadsheet was my mother's love.

I know that now. I know, now, at twenty-two, that the spreadsheet was — was my mother's love. That my mother — that my mother did not know how to love except by planning. That my mother — that my mother had been raised the same way, by a father who had planned her life, and that she had — had internalized it, had — had become it, had — had passed it on. I know, now, that the spreadsheet was — was the best my mother could do. That the spreadsheet was — was my mother saying *I love you, I love you so much that I am going to make sure you are fine, I am*

going to make sure you are fine because the world is not fine and I am scared and I am going to protect you with a spreadsheet.

I know that now.

I did not know that at thirteen.

At thirteen, the spreadsheet was — the spreadsheet was a cage. The spreadsheet was the thing I was — was going to escape. The spreadsheet was — was the thing I was going to be too stubborn to be.

I was right.

I was right to escape.

I was — I was right to be too stubborn.

But I was also — I was also wrong about my mother. I was wrong that the spreadsheet was — was malicious. I was wrong that the spreadsheet was — was a weapon. The spreadsheet was — was a frightened woman's love. The spreadsheet was — was a frightened woman trying to protect her daughter the only way she knew how.

I know that now.

I am telling you about the spreadsheet because — because the spreadsheet is the reason I am the person I am. The spreadsheet is the reason I am stubborn. The spreadsheet is the reason I — I do things that are not on the list. The spreadsheet is the reason I — I am the person who sat down on a park bench at one in the morning, because — because the park bench was not on the spreadsheet. The park bench was — was the most not-on-the-spreadsheet thing I had ever done. The park bench was

— was the beginning of me.

The park bench was where I met Shirase.

The spreadsheet had not — had not predicted that.

The spreadsheet had not — had not planned for that.

The spreadsheet had not — had not allowed for that.

The spreadsheet was wrong.

The spreadsheet had been wrong about everything.

I was — I was going to live a life that was not on the spreadsheet.

I was going to live a life that was — was mine.

And it was going to start — it was going to start on a park bench, at one in the morning, with a girl with dead eyes and waist-length black hair, who needed a cardigan and a melon pan.

It was going to start — it was going to start with her.

It was going to start with the *oh*.

Before VI — The Bunker

(Akari)

I want to tell you about the bunker.

My mother has a bunker. I have mentioned this. I told you it was in Nagano. I told you it had a six-month supply of food. I told you it had a generator and a water filtration system. I did not tell you about the bunker in detail, because the bunker is — the bunker is the other thing. The bunker is the thing that explains my mother, and the thing that explains me, and the thing that explains — that explains why, when the moon started falling, my mother went to the bunker and I did not.

The bunker started in 2011.

My mother was — my mother was in Tokyo on March 11, 2011. She was at the firm. She was in a meeting. She was — she was on the fourteenth floor of a building in Marunouchi when the earthquake hit. The earthquake was — the earthquake was the Tohoku earthquake. The earthquake was 9.1. The earthquake was — the earthquake was the largest earthquake in Japan's recorded history. The building — the building swayed. The building did not fall. But the swaying — the swaying went on for — for minutes. For — for what felt like forever. My mother was on the fourteenth floor, in a meeting, and the building was swaying, and she could not — she could not get to the ground. She could not — she could not get to me. I was in Niigata. I was — I was two years old. I was at home, with the nanny. My mother was in Tokyo, in a swaying building, and she could not get to me.

She — she tells this story. She has told it to me, three times, in my life. She told it to me once when I was ten, once when I was thirteen, once when I was sixteen. She tells it the same way each time. She tells it flat. She tells it — she tells it the way she tells everything. But her hands — her hands shake, when she tells it. Her hands shake, the way Shirase's hands shake when she has not slept. Her hands shake, and she does not — she does not notice they are shaking, and I do not — I do not tell her.

She tells the story.

She was on the fourteenth floor. The building was swaying. The phones went down. She could not call me. She could not call the nanny. She could not — she could not get to the ground, because the stairs were full of people, because the elevators were dead, because the building was swaying and nobody could move. She stood in the meeting room, on the fourteenth floor, and she watched — she watched out the window, she watched Tokyo — she watched Tokyo — she watched Tokyo *stop*. She watched the trains stop. She watched the cars stop. She watched the people — the people in the streets, the people below her, the people who were — who were running, who were — who were standing, who were — who were looking up, at the buildings, at the sky. She watched Tokyo stop.

And she could not get to me.

She could not get to me for — for two days. The trains were not running. The roads were — were jammed. The phones were — were down, mostly. She — she walked. She walked from Tokyo to — not to Niigata, that would have been impossible. She walked from Tokyo to — to Takasaki. She walked for — for fourteen hours. In heels. In a suit. She

walked from Tokyo to Takasaki, fourteen hours, in heels, because she could not get to me any other way, and she — she had to get to me. She had to.

She got to Takasaki. She got a bus. The bus got her to Niigata. She got to Niigata. She got to the apartment. She got to me. I was — I was fine. I was two. I had been with the nanny. The nanny had — had taken care of me. The nanny had — had fed me, had — had changed me, had — had played with me. I had not — I had not known. I had not known that my mother was — was walking from Tokyo to Takasaki in heels. I had not known that the world had — had almost ended. I had been two. I had been fine.

My mother was not fine.

My mother was — my mother was never fine again.

I tell you this because — because the bunker was born on March 11, 2011. The bunker was born — was born in the mind of a woman who had — who had walked fourteen hours in heels to get to her daughter, who had — who had stood on the fourteenth floor of a swaying building and watched Tokyo stop, who had — who had not been able to get to her child. The bunker was — the bunker was my mother's answer. The bunker was — the bunker was the thing my mother had built, in her mind, in the years after, the thing she had — had built to make sure that — that never happened again. That she would never — never be unable to get to me. That she would never — never be caught, on the fourteenth floor, watching Tokyo stop, unable to reach her child.

The bunker was — the bunker was love.

The bunker was — the bunker was a frightened woman's love, built into the ground.

The bunker was in Nagano. My mother had bought the land in 2014. She had — she had bought it quietly, through a shell company, because she did not want — she did not want anyone to know. She had — she had built the bunker in 2015. She had — she had hired a contractor, a firm that built — that built bunkers, that — that this was a thing, that there were firms that built bunkers, that there were — that there were people in Japan, after 2011, who — who built bunkers, who — who had decided, like my mother, that — that the world was not safe, that — that the world was — was going to end, again, sometime, and that — and that they were going to be ready.

The bunker was — the bunker was small. It was — it was two rooms, underground, with — with a steel door, with — with a generator, with — with a water filtration system, with — with six months of food, with — with a radio, with — with a bed, with — with a chemical toilet, with — with everything. Everything my mother could think of. Everything my mother had — had read about, in — in the forums she — she belonged to, the — the prepper forums, the — the forums where people who had been — who had been on the fourteenth floor, who had — who had watched Tokyo stop, who had — who had decided to be ready — the forums where they — where they talked, where they — where they planned, where they — where they built.

The bunker was — the bunker was my mother's project.

The spreadsheet was my mother's other project.

The two projects were — were the same project. The two projects were — were my mother trying to — to keep me safe. The two projects were — were my mother trying to — to make sure I was — was fine. The spreadsheet was — was the plan for me, above ground, in the world. The bunker was — was the plan for me, below ground, when the world ended.

My mother was — my mother was thorough.

My mother was — my mother was — was a frightened woman who had decided, on March 11, 2011, that — that the world was not safe, and that — that she was going to protect her daughter, no matter what, and that — that she was going to protect her daughter with — with plans, with — with spreadsheets, with — with bunkers, with — with everything she had.

I did not — I did not understand this at thirteen.

At thirteen, the bunker was — the bunker was crazy. The bunker was — was the thing my mother did, the — the thing that — that proved my mother was — was not okay, was — was paranoid, was — was a woman who had — who had lost her mind, a little, on March 11, 2011, and — and had not gotten it back.

At thirteen, I — I was embarrassed. I was — I was embarrassed that my mother had a bunker. I was — I was embarrassed that my mother was — was a prepper. I was — I was embarrassed that my mother was — was the kind of woman who — who went to Nagano on weekends to — to check on the bunker, to — to rotate the food, to — to test the generator. I was — I was embarrassed.

At sixteen, I — I was angry. I was — I was angry that my mother had a

bunker. I was — I was angry that my mother had — had spent — had spent millions of yen on — on a hole in the ground in Nagano, when — when she could have — could have spent that money on — on me, on — on time with me, on — on anything other than — than a hole in the ground. I was — I was angry.

At seventeen, I — I was sad. I was — I was sad that my mother had a bunker. I was — I was sad because — because I understood, by seventeen, that — that the bunker was — was love. That — that my mother had — had built the bunker because — because she loved me, because — because she was scared, because — because she had — had stood on the fourteenth floor and — and watched Tokyo stop and — and could not get to me, and — and the bunker was — was her way of — of making sure that — that never happened again.

I was sad.

I was sad because — because the bunker was — was love, but — but it was the wrong kind of love. It was — it was the love that — that builds bunkers, not — not the love that — that sits in the kitchen, that — that asks how your day was, that — that holds you when you cry. It was — it was the love that — that plans, that — that prepares, that — that protects. It was — it was not the love that — that holds.

My mother did not know how to hold.

My mother knew how to plan.

My mother knew how to build bunkers.

I — I did not need a bunker.

I needed — I needed a mother.

I did not have one.

I had a spreadsheet and a bunker.

I tell you about the bunker because — because the bunker is the reason I did not go home when the moon started falling. The bunker is the reason I — I stayed in Niigata. The bunker is the reason I — I stayed with Shirase.

When the moon started falling, my mother called. She said *come to the bunker.* She said *I've been preparing for this.* She said *the bunker is ready.* She said *come.*

I said no.

I said no because — because the bunker was — was the spreadsheet, underground. The bunker was — was the plan, the — the thing my mother had — had decided for me, the — the thing I was — was supposed to do, the — the thing I was — was supposed to be. The bunker was — was the place I was supposed to go, when the world ended, because my mother had — had decided, twelve years ago, that — that this was where I would go.

I did not want to go where my mother had decided.

I did not want to be the daughter with the spreadsheet and the bunker.

I wanted to be — the daughter who had read *Bloom Into You.* The daughter who had felt the *oh.* The daughter who — who had sat down on

a park bench at one in the morning, because — because the park bench was not on the spreadsheet, and — and the girl on the bench was not on the spreadsheet, and — and nothing about the park bench was — was planned.

I wanted to be the daughter who — who chose.

I chose Shirase.

I chose Shirase over the bunker.

I chose — I chose the girl on the bench over the hole in the ground.

I chose — I chose the stubborn, angry, otaku woman with the dead eyes over the — over the plan.

I chose — I chose love.

I chose — I chose the kind of love that — that sits in the kitchen, that — that asks how your day was, that — that holds you when you cry.

I chose — I chose the kind of love my mother did not know how to give.

I chose — I chose Shirase.

I tell you about the bunker because — because the bunker is the thing I left. The bunker is — is the thing I refused. The bunker is — is the thing I was — was too stubborn to accept. The bunker is — is the contrast. The bunker is — is the dark against which Shirase is the light.

The bunker was safe.

The bunker was — was a hole in the ground in Nagano, with — with six

months of food, with — with a generator, with — with everything my mother could think of.

The bunker was safe.

Shirase was not safe.

Shirase was — was a twenty-two-year-old woman with — with eleven jobs behind her, with — with a tiny apartment in Niigata, with — with a futon-couch and a stain on the ceiling that looked like a sad cat. Shirase was — was not safe. Shirase was — was the opposite of safe. Shirase was — was the most not-safe person I had ever met.

I chose Shirase.

I chose — I chose the not-safe person. I chose — I chose the person who — who had been on a bench, who — who had dead eyes, who — who had not eaten since Monday. I chose — I chose the person who — who was not a plan, who — who was not a spreadsheet, who — who was not a bunker.

I chose — I chose love.

I chose — I chose the kind of love that — that does not come with a six-month supply of food.

I chose — I chose the kind of love that — that comes with onigiri and melon pan and a cardigan.

I chose — I chose Shirase.

And I am — I am telling you about the bunker because — because you need to understand what I chose. You need to understand — understand

what I gave up. You need to understand — understand that — that I gave up safety. I gave up — I gave up the bunker. I gave up — I gave up the plan. I gave up — I gave up my mother's love, the — the love that — that builds bunkers, the — the love that — that I was — was supposed to accept, the — the love that — that I was — was supposed to be grateful for.

I gave it up.

I gave it up for Shirase.

I would give it up again.

I would give it up — I would give it up a thousand times.

I would give it up — I would give it up for — for one Tuesday. For — for one onigiri. For — for one moment on the bench, at one in the morning, with the dead eyes and the melon pan.

I would give it up.

I did give it up.

I am — I am giving it up.

Every day.

Every day I am — I am giving up the bunker for Shirase.

And every day — every day it is worth it.

Before VII — The Hair

(Akari)

I want to tell you about the hair.

I dyed my hair blonde in the second year of high school. I have told you this. I told you my mother did not speak to me for a week. I told you that when she started speaking to me again, she said *if you're going to ruin your hair, at least maintain the roots*. I did not tell you why I dyed it.

I dyed it because — because I needed a thing that was mine.

I have told you about the spreadsheet. I have told you about the bunker. I have told you about *Bloom Into You*. I have not told you about the thing that — that happened in between. The thing that happened in between was — was the year I — I tried to be the daughter on the spreadsheet. The year I — I tried to be fine.

I was fourteen.

I was fourteen, and I had — had found *Bloom Into You*, and — and I had — had felt the *oh*, and — and I had — had hidden it under my mattress, and — and I had — had read it seven times. And then — and then I had gone back to being the daughter on the spreadsheet. Because — because I did not know what else to do. Because — because the *oh* was — was a feeling, but — but the spreadsheet was — was the world. The spreadsheet was — was the thing that — that told me what to do, when to do it, how to do it. The spreadsheet was — was the structure. The *oh* was — was the feeling. I did not know — I did not know how to — to make the feeling into a structure. I did not know — I did not know how to — to be the feeling. I

only knew how to — to be the spreadsheet.

So I was the spreadsheet.

I was the spreadsheet for a year.

I was the spreadsheet — I was the daughter who got up at 7 and ate the miso and the rice and the fish and the egg, and went to school, and went to cram school, and came home, and did homework, and went to bed, and — and did it again. I was the daughter who — who got the grades. I was the daughter who — who scored 95 on the mock exam. I was the daughter who — who was fine. I was fine. I was — I was the fine daughter.

And I was — I was dying.

I was dying the way — the way Shirase had been dying, on the bench. Not fast. Not dramatically. Just — slowly. From the inside out. The *oh* was — was still there, under the mattress, but — but I was not — I was not reading it. I was not — I was not feeding it. I was — I was starving it. I was — I was being the spreadsheet, and the *oh* was — was dying, and — and I was — I was dying with it.

I was fourteen.

I was dying, and I did not — I did not know how to — to say it. I did not — I did not have the words. I did not — I did not have anyone to say it to. My mother was — was at the office. My father was — was in Singapore. My teachers were — were pleased with my grades. My classmates were — were jealous of my grades. Nobody — nobody was — was looking at me. Nobody — nobody was — was seeing the dying.

I was dying, and I was fine, and nobody — nobody could tell the difference.

That was the year.

That was the year I — I started — started thinking about it. About — about not being alive. About — about the — the nothing. The — the place where — where you stop. The — the place Shirase had been, on the bench. I — I did not have a word for it. I did not — I did not know that — that the word was *depression*. I did not — I did not know that — that the word was *suicidal ideation*. I did not — I did not have any words. I just — I just had the — the nothing. The — the feeling of — of being — of being — of being the spreadsheet and not the *oh*. The feeling of — of being fine and not — not alive.

I was fourteen.

I was fourteen, and I was — I was dying, and I was — I was fine, and I — I did not know what to do.

I did a thing.

I did a thing that was not on the spreadsheet.

I dyed my hair.

I did not — I did not plan it. I did not — I did not decide. I was — I was walking home from school, on a Tuesday in April, and I passed a — a drugstore, and there was — there was a sign in the window, a — a sign for hair dye, and — and I went in. I went in and I bought — I bought a box of hair dye. Blonde. The — the box had a picture of a woman on it. The woman was — was smiling. The woman had — had blonde hair. The

woman was — was not on a spreadsheet. The woman was — was not fine. The woman was — was just — a woman, with blonde hair, smiling, on a box, in a drugstore, in Niigata, on a Tuesday in April.

I bought the box.

I took it home. I went to the bathroom. I — I read the instructions. I — I put on the gloves. I — I squeezed the dye out of the tube. I — I put it on my hair.

I did not tell my mother.

I did not — I did not tell my mother because — because my mother was at the office. My mother was — was always at the office. My mother was — was not going to come home until 10 PM. My mother was — was not going to see. I was — I was going to dye my hair, and — and my mother was — was not going to see, and — and I was — I was going to have — have a thing that was mine. A thing that — that was not on the spreadsheet. A thing that — that my mother had not — had not planned.

I dyed my hair.

I sat on the edge of the bathtub, with the dye in my hair, and I — I waited. I waited the — the twenty minutes the box said to wait. I waited, and I — I looked at myself in the mirror, and I — I saw — I saw the dye on my hair, and I — I saw the — the brown going — going blonde, and I — I felt a thing.

The thing I felt was — was the *oh*.

The *oh* — the *oh* I had felt, in the bookstore, with *Bloom Into You*. The *oh* that — that I had — had been starving, all year. The *oh* that — that I had

— had thought was dying. The *oh* was — was not dead. The *oh* was — was there. The *oh* was — was back. The *oh* was — was in my hair, in the dye, in the — in the brown going blonde, in the — in the thing I was doing that — that was not on the spreadsheet.

I cried.

I cried in the bathroom, on the edge of the bathtub, with the dye in my hair. I cried the way — the way I had not cried in a year. The way — the way I had — had learned not to cry. I cried the — the ugly kind, the — the loud kind, the — the kind that comes from the stomach. I cried because — because the *oh* was — was still there. Because — because I had not — had not killed it. Because — because I had — had been starving it, but — but it was — was still there, and — and it was — was coming back, and — and I was — was going to be okay.

I was going to be okay.

I was — I was going to be okay because — because I had done a thing. A thing that was — was mine. A thing that — that was not on the spreadsheet. A thing that — that my mother had not — had not planned. A thing that — that was — was me.

I was going to be okay.

I rinsed the dye out. I dried my hair. I looked at myself in the mirror. The hair was — was blonde. Not — not a good blonde. Not — not the blonde on the box. A — a patchy, uneven, drugstore-blonde. A — a sixteen-year-old's-blonde. A — a desperate-blonde. But it was — was blonde. It was — was mine. It was — was the first thing — the first thing in my life — that — that was — was mine.

My mother did not speak to me for a week.

I have told you this.

When she started speaking to me again, she said — she said *if you're going to ruin your hair, at least maintain the roots*. She said it — she said it the way she said everything. Flat. The way — the way you say the weather. But — but her hands — her hands were shaking. The way — the way they shook when she told the story of March 11. The way — the way they shook when she was — was scared. Her hands were shaking, and — and she did not — did not notice, and — and I did not — did not tell her.

She was scared.

She was scared because — because I had — had done a thing that — that was not on the spreadsheet. She was scared because — because the spreadsheet was — was her love, was — was her protection, was — was the thing she had — had built to — to keep me safe, and — and I had — had done a thing that — that was not on it. I had — had stepped outside. I had — had been — had been not-fine. I had — had been — had been the daughter who — who dyed her hair, who — who was not on the spreadsheet, who — who was — was something else.

She was scared.

I was — I was not scared.

I was — I was okay.

I was — I was okay because — because the *oh* was — was back. Because — because I had — had done a thing. Because — because I had — had found a way to — to be the *oh*, a little, in — in the world. Because —

because the hair was — was mine, and — and the spreadsheet could not — could not have it.

The hair was mine.

The hair has been mine ever since.

The hair is — is mine, now, in the Tanaka house, in Sakae, in the mountains, five years after the moon. The hair is — is blonde. I dye it. I maintain the roots, the way my mother told me to, the — the way I have done since I was fourteen. The hair is — is mine. The hair has been mine for — for eight years. The hair is — is going to be mine for — for as long as I am alive.

And I am — I am going to be alive for a long time.

Because I am stubborn.

Because I dyed my hair.

Because the *oh* was — was still there.

Because the *oh* is — is still there.

Because the *oh* is — is Shirase.

Because the *oh* is — is the — the thing I felt, in the bookstore, in the bathroom, on the bench. The *oh* is — is the thing I feel, now, every day, in the Tanaka house, when — when Shirase comes home from — from wherever she has been, when — when she walks through the door, when — when she looks at me, when — when she is — is there. The *oh* is — is the thing I feel. The *oh* is — is the thing that — that keeps me alive.

The *oh* is mine.

The *oh* has always been mine.

The *oh* is — is going to be mine for — for as long as I am alive.

And I am — I am going to be alive for a long time.

Because I am stubborn.

Because I dyed my hair.

Because the *oh* was — was still there.

Because the *oh* is — is Shirase.

Because the *oh* is — is the thing that — that sits in the kitchen, that — that asks how your day was, that — that holds you when you cry.

Because the *oh* is — is the kind of love that — that does not come with a six-month supply of food.

Because the *oh* is — is the kind of love that — that comes with onigiri and melon pan and a cardigan.

Because the *oh* is — is Shirase.

Because the *oh* is — is mine.

Before VIII — The Karaoke

(Akari)

I want to tell you about the karaoke.

I have told you about the karaoke. I told you I had been in a karaoke box with two girls from class. I told you they had started talking about their mothers. I told you I had walked out. I have not told you about the karaoke in detail, because — because the karaoke is the thing that — that brought me to the bench. The karaoke is — is the last thing. The karaoke is — is the thing that — that broke.

I will tell you about it.

I was seventeen. It was a Friday in November. The moon had not — had not started falling yet. The moon was — was just the moon. The moon was — was three hundred and eighty-four thousand kilometers away, and — and nobody was — was worried about it, and — and the world was — was the world, and — and I was — was seventeen, and — and I was dying.

I was dying the way I had been dying at fourteen. The — the nothing. The — the place where you stop. The — the fine. I had — I had been dying for — for a year. Since — since the — the thing with — with the boy. I have not told you about the boy. I will tell you about the boy.

The boy was — was a boy in my class. His name was — it does not matter. He was — he was popular. He was — he was good-looking. He was — he was on the basketball team. He was — he was the kind of boy that — that the girls in my class — that the girls in my class talked about. The —

the kind of boy that — that the girls in my class — that the girls in my class had crushes on. I did not — I did not have a crush on him. I did not — I did not have crushes on boys. I had — I had the *oh*. I had — I had *Bloom Into You*. I had — I had known, since I was thirteen, that — that I did not — that I did not like boys. That — that I liked girls. That — that I was — was a girl who liked girls.

But the boy — the boy confessed to me.

He confessed to me in the hallway, after school, on a Wednesday in October. He — he stopped me. He — he said *Akari, I need to talk to you*. I — I stopped. I — I said *what*. He — he said *I like you. Will you go out with me*. He said it — he said it the way boys say things, the — the way boys who are — are used to — to getting what they want say things. He — he said it like — like it was — was a fact. Like — like my answer was — was going to be yes. Like — like there was — was no other answer.

I said no.

I said no because — because I did not like boys. I said no because — because I did not like him. I said no because — because — because no was — was the answer. No was — was the truth. No was — was what I — what I wanted to say, and — and I said it.

He did not — he did not accept the no.

He — he did not accept the no the way — the way the salaryman had not accepted Shirase's silence. He — he did not accept the no because — because he was — was used to — to getting what he wanted, and — and he did not — did not want to — to not get me. He — he asked again. He — he said *come on, Akari, why not*. He — he said *you're being cold*. He — he

said *just give me a chance*. He — he said all the things that boys say when — when they do not — do not accept the no.

I said no again.

I said no — I said no the way Shirase had — had learned to — to look salarymen in the eye. I said no — I said no flat. I said no — I said no like — like it was — was the weather. *No*. The same tone. The same flatness.

He — he did not — he did not accept it.

He — he grabbed my arm.

He — he grabbed my arm in the hallway, after school, and — and he said *come on, Akari, don't be a bitch*. He said it — he said it the way boys say things when — when they are — are angry, when — when they are — are not getting what they want. He — he grabbed my arm and — and he said *don't be a bitch*.

I — I have not — I have not told anyone this.

I have not told anyone this because — because I was — was ashamed. I was — was ashamed because — because I — I did not hit him. I — I did not — I did not do what Shirase would have done. I — I did not break his nose. I — I just — I just stood there. I — I stood there, with his hand on my arm, and — and I — I felt the — the nothing. I felt the — the nothing come up, the — the nothing that — that I had — had been starving, the — the nothing that — that I had — had been fighting since — since I was fourteen. I felt the — the nothing come up, and — and I — I went — I went into the nothing. I — I went — I went inside. I — I went — I went to the place where — where I could not — could not feel his hand.

I did not hit him.

I — I waited.

I waited for him to — to let go. I waited for — for him to — to get bored. I waited for — for the nothing to — to do its work, the — the nothing that — that makes you — makes you not-there, the — the nothing that — that makes you — makes you invisible, the — the nothing that — that I had — had learned, at fourteen, to — to use as a — as a shield.

He let go.

He let go because — because I was — was not there. Because — because I had — had gone. Because — because the nothing had — had taken me, and — and the boy — the boy was — was holding the arm of — of a body that — that was not — was not me. He — he let go. He — he said *whatever, you're weird.* He — he walked away.

I — I stood in the hallway for — for a long time.

I — I stood in the hallway and — and I — I came back. I — I came back from the nothing. I — I came back to — to my body, to — to my arm, to — to the place where his hand had been. I — I came back, and — and I — I looked at my arm, and — and there was — there was a mark. There was — a red mark, where his hand had been. I — I looked at the mark. I — I did not cry. I — I had — had learned not to cry. I — I pulled my sleeve down. I — I went home.

I did not tell my mother.

I did not tell my mother because — because my mother was — was at the office. Because — because my mother would not — would not have —

would not have known what to do. Because — because my mother would have — would have made a plan. Would have — would have called the school. Would have — would have made a — a thing of it. Would have — would have turned it into — into a — a project. Would have — would have put it on the spreadsheet.

I did not want it on the spreadsheet.

I did not — I did not want — I did not want the boy on the spreadsheet. I did not — I did not want the — the hand on my arm on the spreadsheet. I did not — I did not want — I did not want any of it on the spreadsheet. I — I wanted — I wanted it to — to be mine. I — I wanted the — the nothing to — to be mine. I — I wanted the — the mark on my arm to — to be mine. I — I wanted — I wanted to — to keep it. To — to hold it. To — to not — to not share it.

I did not tell anyone.

I did not tell anyone for — for a month. I — I went to school. I — I saw the boy. I — I avoided the boy. I — I avoided the hallway where it had happened. I — I wore long sleeves. I — I was — was fine. I was — was the fine daughter. I was — was on the spreadsheet.

And I was — was dying.

I was dying faster, now. The — the nothing was — was coming more often. The — the nothing was — was easier to — to go into. The — the nothing was — was not just a shield, now. The — the nothing was — was a place. A — a place I went. A — a place I — I lived, more and more. The — the nothing was — was becoming — was becoming my — my default. The — the nothing was — was becoming — was becoming the — the place I — I

was.

I was dying.

I was dying, and — and nobody — nobody knew. Nobody — nobody could tell. Because — because I was — was fine. I was — was the fine daughter. I was — was on the spreadsheet. I was — was getting the grades. I was — was going to cram school. I was — was — was fine.

The karaoke was — was a month later. A Friday in November. The two girls from class had — had invited me. I did not — I did not want to go. I — I wanted to — to stay home. I — I wanted to — to be in the nothing. I — I wanted to — to not be. But — but the spreadsheet — the spreadsheet said — the spreadsheet said *social engagement*, *attend*. My mother had — had put it on the spreadsheet. My mother had — had said *you need to socialize more, Akari, you can't just study*. My mother had — had put the karaoke on the spreadsheet.

I went.

I went to the karaoke. I — I sat in the box. I — I sang. I — I sang the songs the girls wanted to sing. I — I sang Perfume. I — I sang AKB. I — I sang the — the songs that — that the spreadsheet said — that the spreadsheet said I — I should know, that — that the spreadsheet said — that the spreadsheet said a — a fine daughter — a fine daughter should — should be able to sing.

And then — and then the girls started talking about their mothers.

The girls — the girls started talking about — about how their mothers — their mothers were — were warm. How — how their mothers — their

mothers made them dinner. How — how their mothers — their mothers asked — asked how their day was. How — how their mothers — their mothers held them — held them when they cried.

I — I could not — I could not breathe.

I — I could not — I could not breathe because — because my mother — my mother was not — was not warm. My mother — my mother did not — did not make me dinner. My mother — my mother did not — did not ask — ask how my day was. My mother — my mother did not — did not hold me — hold me when I cried. My mother — my mother had — had a spreadsheet. My mother — my mother had — had a bunker. My mother — my mother had — had a plan. My mother — my mother did not — did not have — have me.

I — I could not breathe.

I — I stood up. I — I said *I have cramps.* I — I said *I have to go.* I — I walked out. I — I walked out of the karaoke box, out of the building, into the street. I — I walked toward the station. I — I did not — I did not get on the train. I — I walked past the station. I — I walked into Hakusan Park.

And — and there she was.

There — there she was. On the bench. With the — the dead eyes. With the — the waist-length black hair. With the — the hoodie pulled over her head. With the — the nothing. With the — the nothing that — that I — I knew. With the — the nothing that — that I — I had — had been living in, for — for a month. With the — the nothing that — that I — I recognized.

I — I sat down.

I — I sat down because — because I — I could not — could not walk past. Because — because the — the nothing in her eyes was — was the nothing in my eyes. Because — because she was — was me. Because — because I — I was — was her. Because — because we were — were the same. Because — because the — the nothing was — was the same nothing.

I sat down.

I gave her my cardigan.

I — I gave her my cardigan because — because — because she was cold. Because — because she was — was cold, and — and I — I had a cardigan, and — and — and that was — was the thing to do. That was — was the — the only thing to do. She was cold. I had a cardigan. I gave it to her.

It was not — it was not complicated.

It was — it was the simplest thing I had ever done.

It was — it was the first simple thing I had ever done.

Everything else in my life had been — had been complicated. Everything else in my life had been — had been on the spreadsheet. Everything else in my life had been — had been a plan, a — a structure, a — a thing that — that someone had — had decided for me. The cardigan was — was not a plan. The cardigan was — was not on the spreadsheet. The cardigan was — was just — a thing. A — a thing I did. A — a thing I — I chose. A — a thing that was — was mine.

I gave her the cardigan.

And — and she looked at me. And — and she said *you didn't have to do that.* And — and I said *I know.* And — and she said *you're going to get wet.* And — and I said *I know.* And — and she said *you should go home.* And — and I almost laughed. And — and I did laugh. And — and I said *yeah, home, sure.* And — and she looked at me. And — and she said *you don't want to go home either.* And — and I — I did not — did not say anything. And — and she said *that's fine. You can sit. If you want. I don't bite.* And — and I sat.

I sat.

I sat on the bench, at one in the morning, with a girl I did not know, and — and I did not — did not go into the nothing. I — I stayed. I — I stayed out. I — I stayed in the — in the world. I — I stayed in the — in the cold, in the — in the wet, in the — in the — in the place where — where I was — was sitting next to — to a stranger, on a bench, in a park, in Niigata, in November.

I stayed.

I stayed because — because the — the nothing in her eyes was — was the nothing in my eyes, and — and the — the nothing in my eyes was — was not — was not as strong, when — when I was — was sitting next to — to her. When — when I was — was sitting next to her, the — the nothing was — was — was smaller. Was — was quieter. Was — was not — not as — as loud.

The nothing was — was quieter when I was with her.

The nothing has — has been quieter when I am with her, ever since.

The nothing is — is quieter now, in the Tanaka house, five years later,

when — when Shirase is — is in the room. The nothing is — is quieter when — when she looks at me. The nothing is — is quieter when — when she is — is there.

The nothing is — is never — is never gone. The nothing is — is still there. The nothing is — is always there. The nothing is — is the place I — I can go, if — if I need to. The nothing is — is the shield.

But — but the nothing is — is quieter, when — when Shirase is — is there.

Shirase is — is the opposite of the nothing.

Shirase is — is the *oh*.

Shirase is — is the *oh* I felt in the bookstore. Shirase is — is the *oh* I felt in the bathroom, with the dye. Shirase is — is the *oh* I felt on the bench, at one in the morning, when — when I looked at her and — and recognized — recognized the nothing, and — and recognized — recognized that — that the nothing was — was not — was not all there was.

Shirase is the *oh*.

Shirase has always been the *oh*.

Shirase is — is the *oh* that — that I — I chose, over the bunker, over the spreadsheet, over the — the plan.

Shirase is — is the *oh* that — that I — I am — am going to keep.

For — for as long as I am alive.

And I am — I am going to be alive for a long time.

Because I am stubborn.

Because I gave her my cardigan.

Because the *oh* was — was still there.

Because the *oh* is — is Shirase.

Prologue — The Girl on the Bench

(Akari)

I should not have been in that park.

It was past one in the morning. I had a train home I should have been on. I had a curfew I had already broken. I had a test the next morning that I had not studied for, because the only thing I had been studying for the past six hours was the inside of a karaoke box with two girls from class who I did not even like that much, screaming Perfume songs until my throat was raw. The karaoke box was supposed to make me feel better. It did not. I had walked out early, told them I had cramps, and started the long walk toward Niigata Station instead of calling my mother.

I did not want to hear her voice. Not yet. Not tonight.

That was why I was in the park.

Hakusan Park is small. It has a row of ginkgo trees, a few benches, a fountain that the city shuts off in October, and a statue of somebody I have never bothered to identify. At night it is lit by three weak lamps that the city has been promising to replace for two years. It is not a park you go to. It is a park you pass through.

I was passing through. I had my school cardigan pulled over my head because it had started to drizzle, and I was thinking, very clearly and very stupidly, about how nice it would be to disappear for a little while. Not forever. Just long enough to skip the test, skip the lecture, skip the look on my mother's face when she saw the English score. Maybe a week. Maybe two. I would come back when the disappointment had cooled.

That was when I saw her.

There is a particular kind of light a public lamp throws onto a sleeping person. It is not kind. It flattens the face, makes the skin look like paper, exaggerates every shadow under the eyes and the jaw. The girl on the bench was curled up with her knees pulled to her chest and her school-cardigan-not-school-cardigan — some kind of oversized hoodie — pulled over her head like a tent. Her hair was black. Not the dyed kind of black, not the salon kind of black. The kind of black that drank the lamp and gave nothing back. It was so long it spilled off the edge of the bench and pooled on the wet ground.

I almost walked past. I should have walked past. Walking past was the correct decision for a seventeen-year-old girl alone at one in the morning in a city park. I had been raised on a steady diet of evening news warnings. Do not talk to strangers. Do not approach suspicious people. Do not be the girl in the cautionary segment.

I stopped.

Her eyes were open.

That was the thing. They were open, and they were looking at the underside of the bench above her, and there was nothing in them. Not sadness. Not fear. Not exhaustion, although she was clearly exhausted. Just — nothing. Like somebody had taken a girl and scooped out everything behind the face and left the face there as a formality.

I knew that look.

I had seen it in the mirror often enough.

"Hey," I said. I did not know what else to say. "Hey. Are you dead?"

The eyes moved. Slowly. Like they had to remember how. They focused on me.

"No," the girl said. Her voice was rough and small. "I'm not dead."

I crouched down a little so I was not looming over her. Looming is bad. I had read that somewhere. "Are you okay?"

"No."

At least she was honest. I waited. She did not elaborate. The drizzle was getting heavier. I could feel it soaking through the cardigan on my head and into the blouse underneath, and I thought, very practically, that if I did not move soon I was going to catch a cold and miss the test anyway, which would actually solve one of my problems.

"Are you cold?" I asked.

"A little."

I unzipped my cardigan — the only thing keeping me dry — and laid it over her. It did not cover much. She was taller than I had expected, even curled up. But she pulled the wool up to her chin like a child and closed her eyes for a second, and when she opened them again, the nothing was still there, but there was a thin layer of something else over it. Surprise, maybe. Or the memory of surprise.

"You didn't have to do that," she said.

"I know."

"You're going to get wet."

"I know."

"You should go home."

I almost laughed. I did laugh, actually. A short, ugly sound. "Yeah," I said. "Home. Sure."

The girl studied me. It was strange. I had been stared at by a lot of people in my life — boys on the train, salarymen at the convenience store, my mother's friends over dinner — and I had learned to recognize the spectrum of stares. The appreciative stare. The predatory stare. The dismissive stare. The girl on the bench was not doing any of those. She was looking at me the way you look at a stray cat that has wandered into your yard. Tired. A little curious. Not at all interested in chasing it away.

"You don't want to go home either," she said. It was not a question.

"No."

"That's fine." She shifted on the bench, making space. The movement was small but definite. "You can sit. If you want. I don't bite."

I sat.

We did not talk for a while. The fountain was off. The ginkgo trees dripped. A taxi passed on the road beyond the bushes and its headlights swept across us and away. The girl pulled my cardigan tighter around her shoulders. I noticed her hands. Small, pale, the nails bitten down to nothing. Not in a nervous way. In an absent way. Like somebody who had forgotten nails existed.

"I'm Sakai Akari," I said, finally.

The girl turned her head. Her hair fell across her face and she did not push it back. "Fukuoka Shirase."

"Shirase-san."

"Shirase is fine. Shirase-san makes me sound like I have a job."

"You don't have a job?"

"I had one. Three of them, this year. They didn't stick."

I should have judged her. I should have made a polite excuse and left. A teenage girl sitting on a bench at one in the morning with an unemployed adult stranger was not a safe decision. It was not even a defensible decision. If I told my mother about it later she would have grounded me until I was thirty.

I stayed.

"Are you hungry?" I asked. I had a convenience store bag in my school bag — a melon pan and a bottle of barley tea I had bought for the walk home. "I have melon pan. It's not great. It's been in my bag since this afternoon."

Shirase looked at me. The thin layer of something over the nothing in her eyes thickened, just a little. "Yeah," she said. "I'm hungry. I haven't eaten since — what day is it?"

"Thursday. Friday morning, I mean."

"Monday. I haven't eaten since Monday."

I dug out the melon pan and the barley tea and handed them to her. She unwrapped the pan with slow, careful fingers, like she had forgotten how packaging worked. Then she took a bite. She chewed. She swallowed. She took another bite. She did not cry. She did not thank me effusively. She ate the melon pan, mechanically, and then she opened the barley tea and drank half of it in one long pull, and then she sat there with the bottle in her lap and looked at the ginkgo trees dripping in the dark.

"Thank you," she said.

"It's just melon pan."

"I don't mean the melon pan."

I did not know what to say to that. So I said nothing. We sat there. The drizzle softened. The lamps buzzed. Somewhere across the river a train clattered over a bridge, and the sound of it faded into the dark like a sentence trailing off.

"I should go," I said, eventually.

"Yeah."

"Will you be okay?"

Shirase considered this. The way she considered it — slowly, seriously, like the question deserved a real answer — was the moment I started to worry about her. Not concern. Not sympathy. Worry. The kind of worry that sits in your chest and does not leave.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe. Probably. I've been okay so far."

"That's not the same thing as being okay."

"No." She almost smiled. Almost. "It isn't."

I stood up. I should have taken my cardigan back. I did not. "I'll come back tomorrow," I said. I did not know why I said it. I did not know her. I had a test in the morning. I had a mother who was going to murder me. I was not the kind of girl who went back to parks to check on strangers.

"Okay," Shirase said. She did not believe me. I could hear it.

"I'll come back," I said again, harder, like saying it twice would make it true.

She pulled my cardigan up to her chin again. "Okay," she said. And then, softer: "Thank you, Akari-san."

I went home. My mother screamed at me for an hour. I took the English test on four hours of sleep and scored a forty-three. The next morning, I skipped my Saturday cram school and went back to the park with two onigiri and a thermos of miso soup.

She was there.

She looked surprised to see me.

I did not understand, then, why that surprised look hurt.

I went back the next day. And the day after. And the day after that.

Chapter 1 — Tuesday Like Any Other

(Shirase)

Tuesday.

Tuesdays are good. Tuesdays are when the new episodes drop on Crunchyroll, when the weekly yuri manga anthology updates on Pixiv, when my favorite obscure JRPG streamer — a guy in Hokkaido who has forty-three viewers on a good day and has been grinding the same impossible mystery dungeon for six years — posts his progress video. Tuesdays are when Akari has half-days at school because of some faculty meeting schedule I have never bothered to understand, which means she shows up at my apartment at one in the afternoon with a convenience store bag and a facial expression that says *you haven't eaten, you absolute gremlin, I can tell from the doorway.*

She is always right. I can never tell how she knows. I think she smells it on me.

Today is Tuesday. It is also, according to the news ticker I have been ignoring on the second monitor for the past four hours, the day the National Astronomical Observatory of Japan released a preliminary statement about anomalous lunar orbital behavior, but I have not gotten to that part yet because I am in the middle of a fourteen-hour run of *Ruinverse: Re-Union*, the yuri-adjacent JRPG I have been mainlining for the past three weeks, and the two leads are about to have the scene. The scene. You know the one. The one where they stand on the cliff and the shorter girl finally says the thing she's been choking on for sixty hours of gameplay, and the taller girl — taller, always taller, this genre has a type

and the type is tall — turns around and—

"Akari's going to kill you," I told myself out loud, which was a mistake, because my own voice saying it made it real.

I looked at the clock. 12:47 PM.

I looked at the kitchen. There were dishes in the sink from Sunday. Possibly Saturday. There was a cup ramen on the desk next to my elbow that I had eaten at 4 AM and forgotten to throw away, and a small pile of melon pan wrappers from the convenience store run two days ago, and an empty bottle of Mitsuya Cider lying on its side like a dead soldier.

"Akari's going to kill me," I said again, with feeling, and saved my game and stood up.

I made it as far as the kitchen before the doorbell rang.

She did not even wait for me to answer. She has a spare key. I gave her a spare key three months into our weird park-bench friendship because she kept showing up when I was asleep and I got tired of her yelling through the letter slot. She used the spare key exactly once, decided she did not like surprising me, and now she rings the bell first and then lets herself in if I do not answer within ten seconds. I have never asked her why. I think I know.

"Shirase," she said, from the genkan. Not a question. A diagnosis.

"I'm up," I called. "I'm up, I'm standing, I'm in the kitchen, I'm—"

She appeared in the kitchen doorway. School uniform still on — the dark blazer, the plaid skirt, the knee socks, all of it crisp and pressed and

ironed within an inch of its life, because Akari irons her school uniform every night, even the knee socks, even the collar, which I have told her is insane and she has told me is *hygiene* — and her blonde hair was down over her shoulders in that perfectly mussed way that looks accidental and takes her twenty minutes with a curling iron in the morning. Her nails today were matte black with tiny silver stars. She had her school bag over one shoulder and a convenience store bag in the other hand, and the expression on her face was the exact expression a veterinarian gives a dog that has eaten something it should not have.

"When did you last sleep," she said.

"Define sleep."

"Shirase."

"I slept! I slept yesterday. The day before yesterday. I slept Monday morning. For — three hours. Maybe four."

She set the bag down on the counter — which I had cleaned last week, I swear, but somehow already had a fine layer of dust and crumbs on it — and started unpacking it. Onigiri. Egg sandwiches. A bottle of barley tea. A small container of pre-cut fruit, the kind that costs three times what whole fruit costs and that Akari buys for me anyway because she knows I will not cut it myself. A pack of wet wipes.

"Wet wipes?" I said.

"You smell like cup ramen and despair," she said. "Go wash your face. I'll make the tea."

"I have a kettle."

"I know. I'm going to use it. Go."

I went. I washed my face. I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror and the face that looked back at me was, as it always was, the face of a girl about sixteen years old, which was the same face I had had when I was twelve and the same face I would have when I was thirty, because whatever prank my genetics had decided to play on me, it had settled on *permanent late teens* and walked away from the table. Black hair down to my waist. Pale skin. A figure that strangers on the train apparently felt entitled to comment on, although never twice, because I had learned very early that the best response to a salaryman's opinion was to look him dead in the eye until he remembered he had somewhere else to be.

I looked, in short, like the protagonist of a light novel. The kind who is mysteriously beautiful and doesn't know it and has accidentally collected four love interests by volume three. This is funny to me, because in real life I am a twenty-two-year-old woman — I lied to Akari about being eighteen when we met, she figured it out within a month, we have agreed never to discuss it again — who has had zero (0) love interests and approximately one (1) friend, and that friend is currently in my kitchen warming up an egg sandwich in my microwave and grumbling about the state of my sponge.

I went back out.

"Eat," she said, pushing the sandwich across the counter at me.

"You don't have to—"

"Eat."

I ate.

She sat down across from me at the tiny kitchen table — the only piece of furniture in this apartment that I have not built a small tower of clutter on, because Akari once picked up my entire manga stack and physically moved it to the floor in a single motion and the look she gave me afterward has haunted me ever since — and she pulled out her phone and started scrolling. She does this. She comes over, she feeds me, she forces me to ingest nutrients, and then she sits across from me and does her own thing on her phone, just existing in the same room. We have done this hundreds of times. I do not understand it. I do not question it. It is the most stable thing in my life and I am terrified of looking at it too closely in case it turns out to be a hallucination I am having.

"The moon's getting closer," she said, not looking up.

"Hm?"

"The moon. It's getting closer to Earth. It's on the news."

I swallowed a bite of egg sandwich. "The moon's always getting closer and further away. It's called perigee. It's in like a twenty-eight-day cycle. I read about it on a Wikipedia binge at 3 AM once."

"Not like this." She turned her phone around and showed me the screen.

The headline was small and clinical, the way NHK headlines always are. *NAOJ Confirms Anomalous Lunar Orbital Decay; Lunar Distance Decreasing at Accelerated Rate; Cause Under Investigation.*

I read it twice. Then I scrolled. Then I read another article. Then

another. Akari sat there and watched me read with that look on her face — the one that is not quite worry and not quite *I-told-you-so* and not quite fear, but somewhere in the triangle of all three.

"How long has this been on the news?" I asked.

"A week. Maybe two. I only noticed because Mom had it on in the kitchen."

"Two weeks."

"It's slow, they said. Like, millimeters a second. But it's speeding up."

"Huh."

I gave her back her phone. She took it. We looked at each other across the tiny table.

"It's probably nothing," I said, because I am an idiot and because the instinct to reassure Akari is stronger than my instinct to read the news carefully. "The government's got people on it. They'll figure it out."

"The government's got people on a lot of things," Akari said, in a voice that suggested she did not have a high opinion of any of them. "Are you going to eat the other half of that sandwich?"

"Yes. Sorry."

I ate the other half of the sandwich. Akari watched me eat it like a hawk watching a particularly dim rabbit. When I was done she handed me the barley tea. I drank half of it. She nodded, satisfied, and went back to her phone.

I went back to my game.

But I did not stop thinking about the moon.

The thing about reading a Wikipedia binge at 3 AM is that you remember more of it than you think. Lunar orbital decay. Tidal forces. Roche limit. The distance at which a satellite's gravity overcomes the differential and the satellite breaks apart. For the moon and Earth, the Roche limit is roughly eighteen thousand kilometers. The moon's current distance is three hundred and eighty-four thousand kilometers. There is a lot of space between now and broken.

But there's also such a thing as *perigee siderial*, the closest point in the orbit. And there's such a thing as tidal locking. And there's such a thing as orbital resonance and gravitic drag and the slow inexorable spiral inward that, in the long view — the very long view, the geologic view — is the moon's actual fate. In about fifty billion years, the moon will spiral into Earth.

Fifty billion years is not a news cycle.

A week is a news cycle.

Millimeters per second is not a news cycle either, unless the millimeters are accelerating.

I looked at my game. The two girls on the cliff were still standing there, waiting for me to advance the dialogue. The shorter one had her hand half-raised. I had been about to make her say the thing.

I alt-tabbed. I opened the NHK live feed. I read for forty minutes. Akari did not interrupt me. When I looked up she had moved to the couch

— the only couch in the apartment, a low cheap futon-couch I had bought at Nitori my first month here — and was reading a yuri manga on her phone. Not even one I had recommended. One she had found on her own. She had been doing this for months. Refusing to admit she liked it. Reading it anyway. Getting quietly, furiously embarrassed whenever I caught her at it.

I watched her for a second. The light from her phone washed up over her face. Her eyes moved back and forth across the page. She bit her lower lip. She did not know I was looking.

It occurred to me, not for the first time, that I was in love with her and that nothing good would come of it.

I went back to the news.

The numbers were not catastrophic. Not yet. But the curve on the graph they had published — lunar distance over time, with the last six months overlaid — was the shape of a ski slope. Flat and flat and flat and then suddenly not flat at all.

I closed the tab. I opened my game. The shorter girl on the cliff raised her hand the rest of the way.

"Akari," I said, not looking away from the screen.

"Mm."

"You're staying for dinner."

It wasn't a question. She did not treat it as one.

"Obviously," she said. "You'd just have cup ramen."

"I would not. I would have—"

"Cup ramen."

"...I would have cup ramen."

"Idiot."

I advanced the dialogue. The shorter girl said the thing. The taller girl turned around. The music swelled. I felt, in the hollow of my chest, the precise and very specific ache that only a well-executed yuri scene can produce. I looked up again. Akari was still reading. She had not noticed.

Outside the window, the sky was overcast. It had been overcast for three days. Somewhere up there, behind the clouds, the moon was where it had always been, except slightly less where it had always been, and slightly more where it had never been.

I went back to the game.

I did not think about it again for the rest of the afternoon. That is the kind of person I am. I will tell you that straight, because someone has to.

But I should have.

Chapter 2 — Tides

(Shirase)

Three days later the news stopped being polite about it.

I found out because I was at the conbini at six in the morning — I had not slept, but I had reached a save point in *Ruinverse* and my eyes had started doing the thing where they stop tracking properly, which means I have about an hour before I become a danger to myself — and the television behind the counter, the one that is always tuned to NHK at a volume nobody can actually hear, was running a banner I could read.

GOVERNMENT STATEMENT: LUNAR ORBITAL ANOMALY "SERIOUS BUT NOT IMMEDIATE THREAT"; PUBLIC ADVISED TO REMAIN CALM; EMERGENCY COMMITTEE TO BE CONVENED.

I stood in the aisle with the instant curry in my hand and stared at the screen for a full thirty seconds. The clerk — college-aged kid, half-asleep, did not recognize me, which was a relief because most of the clerks at this conbini know me by name and have Opinions about my dietary choices — looked up once and then went back to his phone. Nobody else was in the store.

Serious but not immediate threat.

I bought the curry. I bought two bottles of barley tea. I bought, on an impulse I did not examine too closely, a pack of batteries and a small flashlight. At the register I almost put the flashlight back. I did not. The clerk scanned it without comment.

Walking home, I noticed the sky.

It was not the same sky.

I do not mean the weather. The weather was the same grey overcast it had been for a week. I mean the sky itself. There was something in the quality of the light — a flatness, a heaviness, like the air had been pressed down by something slightly larger than it should have been. The clouds moved differently. They had a direction. They were pulling.

I stopped at the bridge over the Shinano River and looked up for a long time.

I could not see the moon. The clouds were too thick. But I could feel it.

That is a stupid thing to say. You cannot feel the moon. The moon is three hundred and eighty thousand kilometers away and it is a rock. You cannot feel rocks. You cannot feel three hundred and eighty thousand kilometers.

But I could feel it.

I went home. I put the curry in the microwave. I ate it standing up at the counter, scrolling through Twitter on my phone, and Twitter was on fire.

Not panic-fire. Not yet. The Japanese side of Twitter was doing what the Japanese side of Twitter always does: posting screenshots of the NHK banner with captions like *well, it was a good run* and *who do I have to apologize to for the moon to stop* and *I wonder if my crush will finally talk to me if the world ends*. The English side was worse. The English side had

already decided it was aliens.

I scrolled for an hour. I found, eventually, a thread by an actual astronomer — someone at the University of Tokyo, with a verified account and a profile picture of a cat wearing a tiny telescope — who was trying to explain, very patiently, what was actually happening.

The moon's orbit, he said, was not supposed to be doing this. Lunar orbital decay is real, but it happens on a timescale of centimeters per year. What was being measured was something on the order of kilometers per day, and accelerating. There was no known natural mechanism. There was no known artificial mechanism that could produce this effect. The most likely explanation was some kind of measurement error, but multiple independent observatories had confirmed the same numbers, so measurement error was looking less and less likely.

He did not say *we don't know*. He said, *further investigation is required*.

I closed Twitter. I opened the NHK article again. I read it again. I read between the lines.

The government was convening an emergency committee. The committee would report in two weeks. Two weeks was a long time in news cycles. Two weeks was the government buying itself room to figure out what to say when it did not know what to say.

The moon was getting closer at kilometers per day, accelerating.

I did the math. I am not good at math. But I am good at Wikipedia binges, and Wikipedia had told me, at 3 AM on some night I no longer remembered, that the moon's average distance was 384,400 kilometers,

and that the moon's angular diameter in the sky was about half a degree, and that the human eye could notice a change in angular diameter of about one percent.

Kilometers per day. Accelerating.

If the acceleration continued, in a month the moon would be measurably larger in the sky. In three months it would be unmistakable. In six months—

I stopped doing the math.

The doorbell rang.

I answered it. It was Akari. She had a convenience store bag in one hand and her school bag over her shoulder and her face was the particular face she makes when she is pretending not to be upset about something.

"You saw the news," I said.

"I saw the news."

"Come in."

She came in. She put the bag on the counter. She did not start unpacking it. She stood there, in the middle of my kitchen, holding her school bag against her chest like a shield, and she looked at me.

"Shirase."

"Yeah."

"Are we going to be okay?"

I looked at her. She was seventeen years old. She was wearing a school uniform and her hair was curled and her nails had tiny silver stars on them and she was standing in my kitchen asking me if we were going to be okay, because there was nobody else to ask and because she had, somewhere along the line, decided that I was the person she asked.

I am not a good person to ask.

But I am a stubborn one.

"Yes," I said. "We're going to be okay."

"You don't know that."

"No. I don't. But I'm going to make it true."

She stared at me. Her mouth did something complicated. Then she put her school bag down on the floor and started unpacking the conbini bag — onigiri, sandwiches, fruit, the same rotation she always brought, except today there was also a pack of batteries and a small flashlight.

I looked at the batteries and the flashlight. I looked at her.

"You too, huh," I said.

"Shut up."

"Akari."

"I said shut up. Eat your onigiri. We're going to figure this out. You're going to figure this out. You're the most stubborn person I've ever met and I am including my mother."

I ate my onigiri. She sat down across from me and ate hers. We did not

talk for a while. Outside, the clouds kept pulling.

"Have you talked to your mom?" I asked.

"No."

"Akari."

"She's in Tokyo. She has her own problems."

"Your dad?"

"Business trip. Singapore. He's fine."

"And you're here."

"I'm here."

I should have said something then. I should have said *come stay with me.* I should have said *we'll figure this out together.* I should have said *I'm glad you're here.* I said none of those things. I ate my onigiri. She ate hers. We looked at our phones. The NHK ticker kept scrolling.

I should have said a lot of things, that day and every day.

I did not.

I did not because I am a coward in the places that matter, and because I had decided a long time ago that the best way to love Sakai Akari was to not love her out loud, and because the moon was getting closer and I did not know what to do about that, and because the onigiri was salmon and Akari had remembered that I like salmon, and the smallness of that fact, the way it sat in my chest like a stone, was easier to feel than to speak.

I have a lot of regrets.

This is the part where I am supposed to tell you about them.

Here is the thing about my regrets. I have them. I have a list. I have run the list in my head a thousand times, on a thousand sleepless nights, lying on my back on a futon in an apartment I could barely afford, staring at a ceiling stain that looked like a sad cat. The list is long. The list is ugly. The list includes things I have done to other people and things I have done to myself and a small but memorable number of things I have done to inanimate objects that did not deserve it.

I do not regret any of them.

I know how that sounds. I know that the correct thing to say, the thing that light novel protagonists are supposed to say when they get the tragic flashback, is *if I could go back I would change everything*. I have read enough light novels to know the shape of that line. I have probably written a version of it in a forum post at 4 AM, when I was younger and more interested in performing grief than feeling it.

I am not interested in performing grief.

Here is what I believe, and you can take it or leave it: I believe that every single thing I have ever done wrong is the reason I am the person I am right now, sitting in this kitchen, across the table from a girl who is asking me if we are going to be okay. Every bad job. Every fight. Every bridge I burned. Every friendship I let rot. Every night I spent on a bench in a park because I had nowhere better to be. Every morning I woke up and chose, against all evidence, to keep going. All of it. All of it led here.

If I undid any of it, I would not be here.

I would not be the person Akari asked.

So no. I do not regret any of it. I do not see the point. Regret is for people who think they get a do-over. I never expected a do-over. I just expected to keep going.

And right now, the moon is getting closer, and I am going to keep going.

I finished my onigiri. I crumpled the wrapper. I looked up.

"Akari."

"What."

"Stay tonight."

She did not look up from her phone. "Obviously."

"Tomorrow too."

"Shirase."

"The day after that. And the day after that. And the day after that. Until this is over."

She looked up. Her eyes were very wide. She had not been expecting that. I had not been expecting to say it. The words had come out of my mouth without checking with the rest of me first, which is a recurring problem I have.

"Okay," she said, after a second. "Okay. Yeah. Fine."

"Fine."

"Fine."

She went back to her phone. I went back to mine. Outside, the clouds pulled.

We did not talk about the moon again that night. We ate dinner. We watched a stream of a guy in Hokkaido grinding the mystery dungeon. We argued about whether the two leads in *Ruinverse* were going to kiss in the true ending or whether the writers were going to do that thing where they almost-kiss and then the credits roll. I said they were going to kiss. Akari said they were not. We bet a melon pan on it.

I won the bet three weeks later. She bought me the melon pan.

By then, the moon was visibly larger in the sky, and the first tidal floods had begun, and the world was starting to come apart.

But that came later. That night, we argued about a video game, and Akari fell asleep on my couch at eleven with her school uniform still on, and I pulled a blanket over her and went back to my desk and opened Wikipedia and started reading about disaster preparedness, and outside the window the clouds kept pulling, and somewhere behind them the moon was where it had always been, except less so.

I read until dawn.

I did not sleep.

I had decided, somewhere in the back of my head, that someone in this apartment needed to be awake, and it was going to be me.

I was, after all, the most stubborn person Akari had ever met.

I was including her mother.

Chapter 3 — Stepping Stones

(Shirase)

I owe you a history. I will keep it short, because long histories are for people who want to be forgiven, and I do not want to be forgiven. I want to be understood, which is a different thing and a harder one.

My mother was a drinker. My father left when I was four. I do not remember him. I remember the shape of the absence — the way the second pillow on the bed was always flat, the way my mother's voice went up half a step when she said his name, the way certain songs on the radio made her stand very still in the kitchen with a glass in her hand — but I do not remember him. He sent a birthday card once, when I was seven. It had a cat on it. I still have the cat.

My mother drank more after he left. She did not become violent. She became small. She sat at the kitchen table with a bottle of shochu and a cigarette and she watched television with the volume very low, and when I came home from school she would look at me as if trying to remember whose child I was. She remembered, eventually. She always remembered. But there was always that second where she didn't, and that second was the shape of my childhood.

I learned to cook at eight. I learned to do laundry at nine. I learned to lie to teachers at ten — *my mother is just tired*, *she works very hard*, *of course she'll be at the parent-teacher conference*, *she's just running late* — and I learned to forge her signature at eleven, and I learned, by twelve, that there were some lies you could not maintain forever and that the trick was to make the truth so boring that nobody wanted to look at it.

I was a quiet child. I did not have friends. I had books, and then I had manga, and then I had anime, and then, when I was thirteen, I discovered the internet and I discovered that there were other people like me, and most of them were wrong about everything but some of them were right about a few things, and one of the things some of them were right about was that the world was not going to save you and you had to save yourself.

I saved myself badly.

I dropped out of high school at sixteen. I had a fight with my mother — the only real fight we ever had, the kind where things get said that cannot be unsaid — and I packed a bag and I walked out and I did not go back. I do not know if she is alive. I have not checked. I am not going to check. This is one of the things on the list of regrets that I do not regret, because checking would not help her and it would not help me, and the only thing it would do is reopen a wound that I have spent eight years learning to live above.

I went to Tokyo. I had no plan. I had forty thousand yen in cash and a bag of clothes and a phone that was about to be disconnected. I slept in manga cafes for a week. I got a job at a convenience store in Ikebukuro. I lost the job because I was late too many times. I got another job at a different convenience store. I lost that one because I told a customer, accurately, that he was being a creep to the high school girl at the next register, and the customer complained, and the manager sided with the customer.

I got a third job. I kept it for three months. I lost it because the manager made a pass at me and I broke his nose.

This is a pattern, by the way. I am not embarrassed about it. I have never been good at being told what to do by people who are wrong, and the universe has spent a remarkable amount of time putting me in rooms with people who are wrong. I have been fired from eleven jobs. I have quit four more. I have been thrown out of two apartments for noise complaints — I make loud slapping noises with my hands when I am concentrating, I have done it since I was a child, I cannot stop, I have tried — and one apartment for what the landlord described as *vibes*.

I am not making that up. *Vibes*. He used that word. He was seventy-two years old. He used the word *vibes* and he asked me to leave.

I left.

I came to Niigata because I had a friend there. The friend had been a friend on a forum — one of the old-school kind, the kind that still existed in 2019, the kind where you recognized each other by signature lines and avatar crops — and she had said, offhandedly, in a thread about where to go when you had nowhere to go, *if you're ever in Niigata I have a couch*. I had never met her. I went anyway.

She was real. The couch was real. She let me stay for two months while I got a job — my twelfth job, at a supermarket this time, stocking shelves, which I was actually good at because I am stubborn and stock does not talk back — and she helped me find the apartment I am still in, the one with the tiny kitchen and the cheap futon-couch and the stain on the ceiling that looks like a sad cat.

She moved away. Sapporo. A job offer. We do not talk much anymore. She sends me a line message on my birthday and I send her one on hers.

That is enough. Some friendships are like that.

I kept the apartment. I kept the job at the supermarket for almost a year. I lost it because the company restructured. I got a job at a bookstore. I kept that one for eight months. I lost it because the bookstore closed. I got a job at a logistics warehouse out by the port. I am technically still employed there, on a contract that gets renewed every three months, doing night shifts unloading containers, which I am good at because it requires no conversation and because the containers are heavy and stubborn and I respect that.

This is my life.

I work. I come home. I play video games. I read yuri manga. I watch anime. I read web novels — the kind that update on Syosetu at 2 AM, the kind written by people who have never met an editor and never want to, the kind where the prose is rough and the feelings are huge and the girls always, always kiss at the end. I watch YouTube. Not the algorithm-driven kind. The slow kind. The kind where a guy in Finland spends forty minutes explaining the history of a single typeface. The kind where a woman in Osaka reviews every brand of canned coffee in Japan, in order, over the course of three years. The kind where a streamer in Hokkaido grinds the same impossible mystery dungeon for six years because he has decided that this is his life's work and the universe can go to hell.

I love these people. I have never met any of them. I love them anyway.

I am, in the broad sense of the word, a hikikomori. I am also, in the broad sense of the word, an otaku. I am also, in the broad sense of the word, a woman in her early twenties who has made every wrong decision

available to her and a few that were not, and who has ended up, against all odds, in a tiny apartment in Niigata with a stain on the ceiling that looks like a sad cat and a friend who is seventeen years old and who brings me onigiri on Tuesdays.

I am aware that this is strange.

I am aware that most people, looking at me from the outside, would say that I have wasted my life. I am aware that my mother, if she is alive, would say the same. I am aware that the eleven jobs that fired me and the four I quit and the two apartments that threw me out and the high school I dropped out of and the father who sent a cat card once and the friend in Sapporo and the forum and the manga cafes and the park bench and the dead eyes in the lamplight — I am aware that all of it looks like wreckage.

I do not see it that way.

I see it like this: every single one of those things was a stepping stone. I did not cross the river gracefully. I crossed it like a stone skipped across water — bouncing, half-drowning, leaving ripples, occasionally hitting a reed and going under for a second — but I crossed it. I am on the other side now. The other side is a tiny apartment in Niigata and a friend who brings me onigiri and a streamer in Hokkaido who is about to clear a mystery dungeon that nobody else in the world has cleared.

I did not get here by being careful.

I got here by being stubborn.

There is a difference between being stubborn and being too stupid to quit. I am both. The two reinforce each other. When I get knocked down, I

get up, not because I am brave but because I am too angry at the universe to stay down, and the anger feeds the stubbornness and the stubbornness feeds the anger, and the result is a person who, when told that the moon is falling, says *okay, what do we do about it* instead of *okay, where do I go to die.*

That is the person Akari asked.

I do not know if I am that person. I do not know if I am up to it. But I am going to try, because trying is the only thing I know how to do, and because Akari is asleep on my couch in the next room and I am not going to let the moon take her.

I will not.

I read about disaster preparedness until dawn. I read about water purification and food storage and emergency power and evacuation routes and what to do when the cell towers go down. I read about Niigata's flood maps and the Shinano River's watershed and the 1964 earthquake and the 2007 earthquake and the 2011 tsunami, which did not reach this far up the coast but which everyone in Niigata remembers anyway because everyone in Japan remembers anyway.

I read about the moon.

The moon's gravity, as it gets closer, will exert stronger tidal forces. The tides will get higher. The tides will get higher faster than the land can adapt. Coastal areas will flood. Low-lying areas will flood. The river will flood. Earthquakes will increase — not because the moon causes earthquakes, exactly, but because tidal stress on the crust does things, and those things include making faults that were already stressed decide

to let go.

The moon is going to wreck the planet.

Not immediately. Not today. But soon. Soon on the scale of weeks, maybe months, depending on how the acceleration continues. The numbers in the astronomer's thread were not kind. Kilometers per day, accelerating. If the acceleration held, the moon would be at half its current distance in eight weeks. At a quarter in sixteen. The Roche limit, the point at which the moon would break apart and become a ring of debris that would then fall on us in pieces, was somewhere between three and six months out.

Three to six months.

I closed the laptop. I looked at the ceiling. The stain looked like a sad cat. I had named the sad cat. I had named it three years ago. Its name was Soba.

"Soba," I said out loud, to the stain. "We're going to need a plan."

Soba did not answer. Soba is a stain. But the act of saying it out loud made it real, and once it was real, I could work with it.

I got up. I made tea. I sat down at the kitchen table with a notebook and a pen, and I started writing.

I am stubborn. I am stupid. I am too angry at the universe to quit.

The moon is going to learn that about me.

Chapter 4 — Lunar Perigee

(Shirase)

Two weeks after the NHK banner, the moon was visible during the day.

That should not have been possible. The moon is visible during the day, sometimes, but only as a pale disc, easily mistaken for a cloud, easily ignored. This was not that. This was a moon that had been pulled forward in apparent size by maybe ten percent, and ten percent does not sound like much, but the human eye is calibrated to notice ten percent changes in familiar objects, and the moon is the most familiar object in the sky.

It hung there in the afternoon like a spotlight someone had forgotten to turn off.

I was on the balcony having a cigarette — I had quit three years ago and started again the day the NHK banner ran, which is also a regret I do not regret — and Akari was inside on the couch reading yuri manga on her phone, and I was looking at the moon and the moon was looking at me and neither of us liked what we saw.

The government had made its statement. *Serious but not immediate threat*. Emergency committee convened. Recommendations to follow. The Prime Minister had appeared on television at 8 PM the night before, looking like a man who had not slept in a week, and had said a number of words that added up to *we are working on it* without ever using those exact syllables.

The markets had reacted. The supermarkets had reacted. There had

been a run on rice and water and batteries and instant ramen, which had lasted three days and then settled, because the Japanese public is on average very good at panic that lasts exactly three days and then turns into grim resignation.

Akari had been grimly resigned for about an hour before she had shown up at my door with a list.

She had written it in her neat schoolgirl handwriting, on the back of a printout from the Cabinet Office website. The list was a disaster preparedness checklist. It was very thorough. It had headings.

WATER — 3L per person per day, minimum 2 weeks supply. FOOD — non-perishable, balanced nutrition, caloric surplus. POWER — batteries, solar charger, hand-crank radio. FIRST AID — bandages, antiseptic, painkillers, prescription meds. WARMTH — blankets, sleeping bags, spare clothing. LIGHT — flashlight, headlamp, candles, matches. COMMUNICATIONS — written emergency contacts, paper maps.

I had looked at the list. I had looked at her. "You're seventeen," I had said.

"I'm almost eighteen."

"You're almost eighteen."

"And you're almost twenty-three and you eat cup ramen four times a week. We all have problems. We're going to the store."

We went to the store.

The store was a warzone. Not the violent kind. The quiet kind. The

kind where salarymen in suits were standing in the rice aisle with calculators and grim faces, and grandmothers were maneuvering carts with the precision of tank commanders, and a woman in front of us at the register had two carts loaded with nothing but canned tuna and was paying in cash.

Akari navigated this with the efficiency of a general. She had a second list, which was a budget, and the budget was itemized, and the itemization was color-coded. She had apparently been planning this since the morning the news broke. She had not told me. She had just shown up.

I followed her through the store. I pushed the cart. I did not argue, because arguing with Akari about logistics is like arguing with gravity about the direction of down.

"We need protein," she said, scanning the canned goods aisle. "Sardines. Mackerel. Chicken. The tuna's already gone."

"How do you know all this?"

"My mom's a survivalist." She said it flatly, not looking at me. "Prepper type. She's been like that since 2011. She has a bunker in Nagano."

"Your mom has a bunker."

"A bunker. With a six-month supply of food. And a generator. And a water filtration system."

I stared at the back of her head. "You're joking."

"I'm not joking. She invited me to come stay when the news broke. I told her I was staying in Niigata."

"Why?"

She did not answer. She reached for a can of mackerel, examined the label, put it in the cart. Reached for another. The motion was very precise and very deliberate and very much like she was not going to look at me.

"Akari."

"Because you're here, you idiot."

She said it the way she says everything that matters — fast and flat and slightly angry, like the words are something she's being robbed of. Then she moved on to the rice aisle.

I stood there for a second with the cart. Then I followed her.

We bought rice. We bought canned fish. We bought miso paste and dried wakame and pickled vegetables and a bag of onions and a bag of garlic and a bottle of soy sauce and a bottle of mirin and a jar of furikake. We bought instant curry, the kind with the seven-year shelf life, even though I hate instant curry, because Akari said it was calorie-dense and we were not buying it for the taste. We bought a case of bottled water. We bought another case. We bought a third case, which the store limited us to, and Akari negotiated with the manager in a voice that did not raise once and somehow produced a fourth case from somewhere in the back.

We bought batteries. We bought a hand-crank radio. We bought a small first aid kit, which Akari supplemented with a separate bag of supplies she had apparently been assembling at home for a week — bandages, antiseptic, ibuprofen, antihistamines, rehydration salts, a thermometer, a blood pressure cuff that I did not think we needed but

that she said was non-negotiable.

We bought a flashlight. We bought a headlamp. We bought candles and matches.

We bought a paper map of Niigata Prefecture, and a second paper map of the Hokuriku region, and a third paper map of all of Honshu, because Akari said *if we have to leave we need to know where we're going and the phones will not last.*

We spent, in total, eighty-three thousand yen. I had forty-seven thousand in the bank. Akari covered the rest. I tried to argue. She looked at me. I stopped arguing.

We carried everything back to my apartment in three trips. Akari organized it. She organized it with a precision that bordered on the surgical — cans by type, then by expiration date; water in the corner by the wall where the building was strongest; first aid in a designated box on the kitchen counter; batteries in a bag hanging from a hook by the door, where they could be grabbed on the way out.

I watched her do this. I sat on the couch and watched her work, and I thought about how strange it was that the universe had put this girl in my life, and how strange it was that she was better at keeping me alive than I was, and how strange it was that I had not noticed that until the moon started falling.

"Akari," I said, when she was done.

She was standing by the kitchen counter, wiping her hands on a towel. She had been working for an hour without sitting down. Her hair was

falling out of its curl. She looked tired.

"What."

"Thank you."

She looked at me. Her mouth did the complicated thing. "Don't thank me," she said. "Just — be careful. Be careful with yourself. Don't stay up for a month. Don't forget to eat. Don't — don't do the thing where you decide you have to do everything yourself and then you collapse and I have to clean up the mess. I hate that thing. I hate that thing specifically."

"I won't."

"You will."

"I'll try not to."

She considered this. "Fine," she said. "I'll try not to is better than I won't. I'll take it."

She sat down on the couch next to me. Not at the other end. Next to me. Our shoulders were almost touching. She was taller than me — she had been taller than me since the second month I knew her, the Universe's little joke on the dynamic — and when she leaned her head back against the cushion her hair fell against my shoulder.

She did not move it.

I did not move either.

We sat there for a long time. Outside the window, the moon hung in the afternoon sky, ten percent larger than it had been a month ago. Inside

the apartment, the shelves were stocked. The water was stacked. The first aid kit was ready. The batteries were by the door.

The moon was falling.

We were not.

I wanted to say something. I wanted to say *thank you for staying*. I wanted to say *I love you*. I wanted to say *if we die I want you to know that the time you brought me melon pan at one in the morning was the most important thing that has ever happened to me*. I wanted to say *I am terrified and the only reason I am not falling apart is because you are sitting next to me*.

I said none of those things.

I sat very still and I let her hair rest on my shoulder and I watched the moon through the window, and after a while her breathing evened out and I knew she had fallen asleep, and I sat there for another hour, not moving, not sleeping, just being the most stubborn person in the room, because someone in this apartment had to be awake and it was going to be me.

Outside the window, the moon did not move.

Closer, yes. But not moving.

I was not moving either.

We were at an impasse, the moon and I, and I intended to win.

Chapter 5 — What I See in Her

(Akari)

I should tell you about me, since Shirase won't.

My name is Sakai Akari. I am seventeen years old. I live in a four-bedroom apartment in the Niigata Station east tower with my mother, who is a partner at a corporate law firm and who has, in the past five years, slept in the same bed as me exactly zero times, because she works until two in the morning and leaves at six and on the weekends she goes to the bunker in Nagano to "decompress." My father is a regional director for an electronics company. He is in Singapore more than he is in Niigata. They are technically still married. I do not know why.

I go to Niigata Prefectural Girls' High School. It is the best public high school in the prefecture. My mother chose it for me. I did not have an opinion. I have never had an opinion about my school, because my mother has had enough opinion for both of us, and her opinion is that I will go to Tokyo University and study law and take over the firm, and any deviation from this plan is a personal attack on her sacrifices as a single working mother.

I am not a single working mother's daughter. I am a single working mother's project.

I dyed my hair blonde in the second year of high school. It was the first thing I ever did that was not on the plan. My mother did not speak to me for a week. When she started speaking to me again, she said *if you're going to ruin your hair, at least maintain the roots*, which is the closest thing

to approval she has ever given me.

I started wearing jirai kei outfits on weekends. Black lace, pink ribbons, platform boots, chokers, the works. I liked the way it looked. I liked the way it felt. I liked the way that men on the street did not know what to do with me when I was dressed like that — they could not categorize me, could not file me under *good girl* or *easy*, and the confusion in their faces was the closest thing to power I had ever felt.

My mother hated it. She said I looked like I worked in a hostess club. I said thank you. She did not speak to me for another week.

I started doing my nails. I am good at my nails. I have a steady hand and a good eye for color and I have spent, no exaggeration, two hundred hours on YouTube watching nail art tutorials. My nails are the only part of my appearance that is entirely mine. My mother cannot touch them. She has tried. She has said *you will not get into Tokyo University with little stars on your fingernails*, and I have smiled and said *yes, mother*, and put little stars on my fingernails anyway.

The nails are mine.

I tell you all this because I want you to understand: I did not need to be in that park. I did not need to be sitting on a bench at one in the morning with a stranger. I had a home. I had a bed. I had a future, mapped out for me in twelve-point Times New Roman on a spreadsheet my mother kept on her desktop labeled *AKARI SCHEDULE 2025*.

I was in that park because I could not breathe in the apartment.

I had walked out of the karaoke box because the two girls from class

had started talking about their mothers. Their mothers were warm. Their mothers made them dinner. Their mothers asked how their day was. Their mothers were the kind of mothers who appeared in commercials for fabric softener. I had sat there in the karaoke box with a microphone in my hand and I had realized, with a sudden terrible clarity, that I could not remember the last time my mother had asked me how my day was, and that I could not remember the last time I had wanted her to, and that the gap between those two facts was the shape of my entire life.

I had walked out. I had walked toward the station. I had not been able to make myself get on the train. I had walked past the station. I had walked into Hakusan Park.

And there she was.

I want to be clear about what I saw, that first night.

I did not see a beautiful tragic girl on a bench. I did not see a romantic lead. I did not see a love interest. I saw a woman — I did not know her age then, I did not know her name, I did not know anything — who had been eaten alive by something, and who had not bothered to fight it, and who was lying on a park bench in the rain because she could not think of a better place to lie. I saw someone who had given up in a way that was not dramatic. Not cinematic. Just — quiet. Just finished.

I knew that look.

I had seen it in the mirror.

I had been seeing it in the mirror for years.

I do not know why I sat down. I do not know why I gave her my

cardigan. I do not know why I came back the next morning with onigiri. I do not know any of it. I have tried to explain it to myself a hundred times and I cannot. The best I can do is this: she was the first person I had ever met who was not pretending.

Everyone in my life pretends. My mother pretends that she is a good mother. My father pretends that he is a good father. My classmates pretend that they are happy. My teachers pretend that they care. The boys who confess to me on the street pretend that they know me. The girls who befriend me pretend that they like me. Everyone is pretending, all the time, and I have spent my whole life being the audience for it, smiling politely, saying the right things, dyeing my hair and doing my nails because those were the only things that were real.

Shirase did not pretend.

When I asked her if she was okay, she said no. When I asked her if she was hungry, she said yes. When I asked her if she would be okay, she said *I don't know.* She did not perform. She did not edit. She was just — there. Present. Honestly, terribly present.

It was the first time I had been in a room — even an outdoor room, even a park bench room — with someone who was not performing.

I came back the next day. And the next. And the next.

I brought food because she needed food. I brought tea because she needed tea. I started bringing books because she mentioned, offhand, on the third day, that she had not read a book in two months because she had pawned her e-reader for rent money, and the look on her face when she said it was the first time I had seen her feel anything at all.

I brought her *Bloom Into You*. Volume one. I had bought it at Animate in Tokyo on a school trip, smuggled it home in my school bag, hidden it under my mattress. I had not told anyone I owned it. I had not told anyone I read it. I had not told anyone that I had read it seven times and that the spine was cracked and that there were pages I had memorized.

I gave it to her on the fourth day.

She looked at it. She looked at me. She looked at it again.

"You read this?" she said.

"Yeah."

"You — you read this."

"Yeah, Shirase. I read this. Don't make it weird."

She opened it. She read the first page standing up. She read the second page. She sat down on the bench and read the third. She did not look up for an hour.

When she finished the volume she closed it carefully, the way you close something precious, and she handed it back to me, and her eyes were wet.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome."

"Can I — can I have volume two?"

I brought her volume two the next day. And three. And four. And five. And six. And seven. And eight. I brought her the whole run, a volume a

day, smuggled out of my apartment in my school bag. She read them like they were oxygen.

She did not cry at the ending. She sat there for a long time with the volume closed in her lap. Then she looked at me and said, very quietly, "Akari. Do you have any more?"

I started bringing her everything. My whole collection. The stuff I had hidden under my mattress for three years. The yuri manga. The yuri light novels. The yuri anthologies. I brought them in batches. I brought them in backpacks. I brought them in suitcases, on the days my mother was in Nagano and I could steal a suitcase without being asked.

She read them all.

She read them in the park, on the bench, in the rain, in the cold. She read them at night under the lamp. She read them with my cardigan pulled around her shoulders. She read them with the same dead-eyed focus she brought to everything — the same stubborn, ferocious, refusal-to-quit attention that I would later learn was the engine that ran her.

I started to fall in love with her around volume four of *Bloom Into You.*

I did not know it then.

I know it now.

I know it now because I am lying on her couch at two in the morning, three weeks into the moon crisis, and she is at the kitchen table with her laptop open and her notebook out and three empty barley tea bottles lined up next to her elbow, and she has not slept in — I count — I think this is the seventh day. She has not slept in seven days. She is reading

about disaster preparedness and tidal forces and evacuation routes and she is doing it with the same dead-eyed focus she used to bring to *Bloom Into You*, and I am watching her from the couch, and my chest hurts.

It hurts the way it has hurt for a year and a half. The same hurt. The same shape. The same quiet, terrible, *I would die for this person and she does not know it.*

She does not know it.

I am sure she does not know it. I am sure because she looks at me the way you look at a stray you have agreed to feed, with gratitude and a little bewilderment and absolutely zero comprehension that the stray has decided, somewhere along the line, that you are the only person in the world who matters.

She thinks I am kind. She thinks I am a good person. She thinks I bring her onigiri because I am a good person.

I bring her onigiri because I love her and I do not know what else to do with that.

There is a difference.

I should tell her. I know I should tell her. I have known I should tell her for a year. I have rehearsed the conversation in my head a thousand times. I have written it out in the notes app on my phone, deleted it, written it again. I have stood in front of the mirror in my school uniform and practiced the words until they sounded ridiculous, because they are ridiculous, because *Shirase, I am in love with you, I have been in love with you since you read Bloom Into You on a park bench in the rain, I do not know*

how to be in love with you but I am, please do not make it weird is a ridiculous thing to say to a twenty-two-year-old woman who thinks of you as the kid who brings her onigiri.

So I do not say it.

I bring her onigiri instead.

The moon is getting closer. I can see it through the kitchen window. It is larger than it was last week. It is larger than it was yesterday. The curve of it hangs in the sky like a threat, and the light it throws is wrong — too bright, too white, the color of a hospital.

Shirase has not noticed. Shirase is reading. Shirase has not slept in seven days.

I should make her sleep. I should make her eat. I should make her stop.

I should tell her I love her.

I do not do any of these things. I lie on the couch and I watch her read, and I think about how stubborn she is, and how stubborn I am, and how the two of us together are probably the most stubborn configuration of two people in the history of Niigata Prefecture, and how that stubbornness is the only thing that is going to get us through this.

I think about how I am going to keep her alive.

I think about how I am going to do it even if it kills me.

I think about how that is exactly the kind of thing she would say, and how I have started to sound like her, and how that should probably worry me but it doesn't.

I close my eyes.

I do not sleep.

There is someone in this apartment who has to be awake, and it does not have to be her.

Chapter 6 — Pantry and Prejudice

(Shirase)

Six weeks into the moon crisis, the government finally admitted what the astronomer on Twitter had been saying for a month.

The moon is approaching Earth at an accelerating rate. The cause is unknown. The timeline to critical approach is estimated at four to six months. Civil defense measures are being implemented. Evacuation of low-lying coastal areas is recommended.

The Prime Minister said this on a Friday. The airports were full by Saturday morning. The trains to Tokyo were full by Saturday afternoon. Tokyo itself was, by Sunday, in the process of emptying out — but going where, nobody knew, because there was nowhere to go. The moon was over everyone.

I watched all of this on my second monitor while playing *Ruinverse* on the first.

I had cleared the true ending by then. The two leads had kissed. I had won the melon pan from Akari. I had eaten the melon pan. I had then started a new game plus, because *Ruinverse* has a hidden second route that unlocks after the true ending, and the second route is told from the other girl's perspective, and I am the kind of person who plays those.

Akari had moved in.

She had not asked. She had not announced it. She had simply stopped going home. Her school bag had migrated from the couch to the chair by

the window. Her toothbrush had appeared in my bathroom. A small bag of her clothes — black lace, pink ribbons, the works — had materialized in the corner of my bedroom, and from it she produced, every morning, a fresh outfit that she put on with the precision of a soldier dressing for inspection.

She was still going to school. I had not asked her to stop. She had not offered. The school was technically still open, on a reduced schedule, because the Niigata Board of Education had decided that maintaining routine was important for the psychological wellbeing of young people during a national emergency, and Akari had said, with a look on her face that suggested she was restraining herself from violence, *the psychological wellbeing of young people is going to be a lot more compromised when the moon hits us.*

She went anyway.

She came home — *home* being my apartment, now, a word I did not say out loud because saying it out loud would make it real and I was not ready for it to be real — at one in the afternoon on Tuesday, after the half-day, and she walked in with a face like a thundercloud.

"We're leaving," she said.

I looked up from my game. "What?"

"Niigata. We're leaving. Today."

"What happened?"

"The Board of Ed just announced school closures through the end of the month. And the trains to Tokyo stopped running this morning. And

there was a run on the gas stations in Bandai. And—" She stopped. She took a breath. "And my mother called."

I saved my game. I closed the laptop. I gave her my full attention. "What did she say?"

"She said come to the bunker."

"Okay."

"I told her no."

"Akari."

"I told her I'm not leaving you."

I did not say anything. The room was very quiet. The fridge hummed. Outside the window, the moon — fifteen percent larger than it had been a month ago, and growing — hung in the afternoon sky like a coin someone had stuck there.

"You don't have to—"

"Don't." She said it sharp. "Don't you dare. Don't you dare offer me an out. I don't want an out. I want a plan. You're the most stubborn person I've ever met. Make me a plan."

I looked at her. She was seventeen years old and she was standing in my kitchen with her school uniform still on and her hands were shaking and she was looking at me like I was the only solid thing in the room.

I should have said *you should go to your mother's bunker.* I should have said *you'll be safer there.* I should have said *you're seventeen, you have your*

whole life, don't waste it on me.

I am a coward in the places that matter.

"Akari," I said. "Sit down."

She sat.

I got up. I went to the kitchen counter. I picked up the notebook I had been writing in for three weeks — the disaster prep notebook, the plan notebook, the *what do we do when the moon finally breaks us* notebook — and I put it on the table between us.

"I've been working on this," I said. "I've been working on it since the news broke. I haven't shown you because I didn't want to worry you. But you should see it now."

She opened the notebook. She read. I watched her read.

The plan was not complicated. It was not even particularly good. It was, however, mine, which meant it was stubborn and concrete and very, very specific.

Phase One: Hunker down in apartment. Supplies for 6 weeks. Monitor situation. Stay out of crowds. Stay off the highways.

Phase Two: If apartment becomes untenable (flooding, structural, social unrest), relocate inland. Target: mountain town, elevation above 500m, outside flood zone. Candidates: Muikamachi, Tsunan, Sakae. Pre-recon route mapped. Walking distance: 2-3 days with supplies.

Phase Three: If relocation becomes untenable, fallback to high ground. Long-term shelter. Forage, fish, garden. Wait for stabilization or rescue.

I had drawn a map. I had marked the routes. I had marked the rivers, because the rivers were going to flood. I had marked the likely choke points on the highways, because the highways were going to be a nightmare. I had marked the convenience stores and the supermarkets along the route, because they were going to be looted, but maybe not all of them, not immediately.

I had also, at the back of the notebook, written a list.

Things I will not let happen: - Akari will not die. - I will not die. - We will not be separated. - We will not starve. - We will not give up.

Akari read this last page for a long time.

She did not look up. She did not speak. Her hair fell forward and hid her face.

When she finally looked up, her eyes were wet.

"You wrote this three weeks ago," she said.

"Yeah."

"You didn't show me."

"No."

"Why?"

I did not know how to answer that. I did not know how to say *because I am a coward and showing you would have made it real and I was not ready for it to be real.* I did not know how to say *because if I showed you the plan and you laughed at it I would have died.* I did not know how to say *because*

the last page is the closest thing to a confession I have ever written and I did not know what you would do with it.

"Because I didn't want to worry you," I said.

She looked at me. Her mouth did the complicated thing. She closed the notebook. She put both hands flat on the cover.

"Okay," she said. "Phase One. We're in Phase One. What do we do?"

I almost laughed. I did laugh, a short strange sound. "We do what we've been doing. We wait. We watch. We keep the supplies stocked. We —" I stopped. "We argue about whether I'm allowed to play video games during the apocalypse."

"You're not."

"I'm absolutely allowed to play video games during the apocalypse."

"You're not. You're going to read the evacuation routes. You're going to study the map. You're going to memorize every bridge between here and Tsunan."

"I already have."

She blinked. "What?"

"I already have. I memorized them last week. I can name every bridge on Route 17 between Niigata and Muikamachi, in order, with the kilometer markers. I can also name every convenience store."

She stared at me.

"What?" I said. "I'm stubborn. You knew this."

She did not say anything for a long moment. Then she stood up. She walked around the table. She — and I did not expect this — she hit me. Open palm, on the shoulder, not hard. The slapping sound was very loud. She had nailed me with the exact same hand-position I use when I'm concentrating, which I did not know she had noticed.

"Ow," I said.

"You absolute — you complete — you —"

"Akari."

"You could have told me. You could have — I've been — for three weeks I've been —"

She did not finish the sentence. She sat down on the floor next to my chair, because there was no other chair, and she leaned her head against my leg, and she did not cry, but she breathed very hard for a while, and after a while the breathing evened out, and she stayed there, with her head against my leg, and I did not move.

I did not move because moving would have broken the moment, and I had decided, somewhere in the back of my head, that I was going to let this moment exist for as long as it wanted to.

The moment lasted about ten minutes.

Then Akari stood up, wiped her face with the back of her hand, and said, "Right. Phase One. What's for dinner."

"We have instant curry."

"I hate instant curry."

"I know."

"We're having instant curry."

"I know."

She went to the kitchen. She started heating water. I went back to my laptop. I did not open the game. I opened the map. I studied the map. I had memorized it, but I studied it again, because studying it was something to do with my hands.

Outside the window, the moon hung.

I looked at it.

"You're not taking her," I told it, very quietly. "You can take the rest of it. You can take the coastline and the rivers and the buildings and the trains. You can take the cities and the countries and the governments. You can take my apartment and my manga and my save file. You can take the streamer in Hokkaido and his mystery dungeon. You can take the whole world if you want. But you're not taking her."

The moon did not answer. The moon is a rock.

But I am stubborn.

And the moon was going to learn that about me.

Chapter 7 — Six Months Earlier, the Bench

(Akari)

I want to tell you about the first three months.

I want to tell you because Shirase will not. Shirase does not talk about the bad parts. She makes a joke, she changes the subject, she pretends it was fine. She pretends the park bench was a phase. She pretends she was just *between jobs* and *figuring things out*. She pretends that the dead-eyed woman I met at one in the morning was just having a bad week.

She was not having a bad week.

She was dying.

Not fast. Not dramatically. Not in a way that anyone would have noticed, least of all her. She was dying the way a candle dies when you stop lighting it. Slowly. From the inside out.

I did not understand this the first week. I brought her onigiri and I sat with her and I went home and I told my mother I had been at cram school. The second week I understood it a little. The third week I understood it fully.

The third week, she was not on the bench.

I got to the park at seven in the morning. The bench was empty. My cardigan — the one I had given her that first night, the one she had been using as a blanket for two weeks — was folded neatly on the seat. There was a note under it.

I picked up the note. It was written on the back of a convenience store receipt, in handwriting that was very small and very careful.

Akari-san — Thank you for the onigiri. Thank you for the cardigan. Thank you for coming back. I'm sorry I can't be here when you come today. I have to go somewhere. I don't know if I'll be back. I want you to know that you were the kindest person I met this year. Probably ever. You should go home. You should study for your test. You should not come to the park at one in the morning. It is not safe. Thank you. — Shirase

I read the note three times.

Then I sat down on the bench and I cried. I did not cry the way people cry in light novels — the elegant, single-tear-rolling-down-the-cheek kind of crying. I cried ugly. I cried the way you cry when you are seventeen and you have just realized that the person you have spent three weeks trying to save has decided that they do not want to be saved, and you do not know where they have gone, and you do not know how to find them, and the only thing you have of them is a cardigan that smells like them and a receipt-note that says *you were the kindest person I met this year.*

I cried for about ten minutes.

Then I stopped crying. I wiped my face with the back of my hand. I folded the note and put it in my wallet. I put on the cardigan.

Then I started looking for her.

I did not know where to look. Niigata is not a huge city, but it is not a small one. I did not have her phone number. I did not have her address. I had a name — *Fukuoka Shirase* — and a face, and the memory of the way

she had said *I haven't eaten since Monday*, and a list of the things she had told me she liked, which was: yuri, anime, manga, video games, web novels, YouTube, and *interesting things*.

I started at the convenience stores.

There are about forty convenience stores in central Niigata. I knew this because I looked it up on my phone. I spent that Saturday walking to all of them. I walked into each one. I looked at the customers. I looked at the staff. I did not see her. I left. I went to the next one.

I did this for three days. I skipped school on Monday. My mother noticed on Tuesday. She did not ask where I had been. She just looked at me — at my face, which was grey with exhaustion, and at my uniform, which was wrinkled — and she said, very coldly, *if you fail the Tokyo University mock exam I will not forgive you*, and she went to work.

I kept looking.

I found her on Wednesday.

She was not at a convenience store. She was at a manga cafe in Bandai, the kind that is open twenty-four hours and that smells like instant ramen and desperation. I had not thought to check manga cafes. I had been checking convenience stores and parks and the riverbank and the station. I walked into the manga cafe on instinct, because I was passing it, because my feet hurt, because I needed to sit down.

I saw her hair first.

Black hair. Waist-length. Spilling over the back of a booth chair. She was curled up in the booth with her knees drawn up, exactly the way she

had been curled up on the bench. There was a manga open on the table in front of her — I could not see the title — and a cup of something that had gone cold. She was reading.

I stood in the aisle of the manga cafe and I looked at her and I felt, very suddenly, that I was going to start crying again, and I did not want to start crying again because I had already cried about this once and that was enough.

I walked over. I stood next to her booth. She did not look up.

"You left a note," I said.

She looked up.

Her face did something I had never seen it do. It went through about four expressions in a second — surprise, fear, shame, and then a weird kind of stubborn resignation, the *well, you found me, I guess I have to deal with this now* expression that I would later learn was her default expression whenever anyone cornered her.

"I told you not to come to the park," she said.

"I didn't come to the park. I came to a manga cafe. Different place. Sit up."

She sat up. She looked at me. She looked — she looked like she had not eaten in three days, which she probably hadn't, and like she had not slept in longer, which she definitely hadn't. There were dark circles under her eyes that I had not seen before, because before, the lamplight had been too kind.

"Have you eaten?" I asked.

"I had a melon pan."

"When."

"I don't remember."

I sat down across from her. I put my school bag on the table. I opened it. I had learned, by then, to carry food. I had two onigiri, a thermos of miso soup, and a bottle of barley tea. I put them on the table in front of her.

"Eat," I said.

She did not argue. She ate.

I watched her eat. I watched the way her hands shook, just slightly, when she unwrapped the onigiri. I watched the way she chewed slowly, carefully, like her body had forgotten how. I watched her finish the onigiri and drink the miso soup and drink half the barley tea, and I watched the color come back into her face, just a little, and I watched her look at me with an expression I did not have a word for.

"You came looking for me," she said.

"Yes."

"For three days."

"Yes."

"Why?"

I did not know how to answer that. I was seventeen. I did not have the words. I did not have the vocabulary for *because you are the only person in my life who is not pretending, and the thought of losing you is the worst thought I have ever had, and I would rather fail Tokyo University than not find you.* I did not have any of that. I had *because.*

"Because," I said.

She looked at me for a long time.

Then she said, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay. You can — you can come back. If you want. I'm — I'm staying here for a while. Booth seven. They don't kick you out if you keep ordering drinks."

"You're living in a manga cafe."

"It's warmer than the park."

"That is a low bar, Shirase."

"I know."

I came back the next day. And the next. And the next. I brought food. I brought manga. I brought the second volume of *Bloom Into You* and the third and the fourth. I brought a change of clothes for her, taken from my own closet, because she was taller than me but not by much and my oversized hoodies fit her okay. I brought shampoo and a toothbrush and a hairbrush, because her hair was starting to mat.

I did all of this on my lunch break and after school and on the weekends. I told my mother I was at cram school. I told my teachers I was studying in the library. I lied to everyone I knew.

I did not lie to Shirase.

By the end of the second week I knew her whole story. She told it to me in pieces, between volumes of manga, between bites of onigiri, in the long quiet hours of the afternoon when the manga cafe was empty and the staff did not care. She told me about her mother. She told me about the eleven jobs. She told me about the manager whose nose she broke. She told me about the friend in Sapporo. She told me about the apartment she had lost. She told me about the park bench.

She told me she had been on the bench for two weeks before I showed up. She told me she had decided, that night, that she was going to lie on the bench until something happened. She did not know what. She did not care what. She just wanted something to happen.

"And then," she said, looking at me with that weird stubborn-resignation expression, "and then you showed up with a melon pan."

I did not cry. I had already cried about this once. That was enough.

Instead I said, "You're not allowed to do that again."

"Do what?"

"Decide to lie on a bench until something happens. You're not allowed. That's — that's not — Shirase, that's not okay."

"I know."

"You're not allowed."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to."

"I know."

I looked at her. She looked at me. The manga cafe hummed around us. Someone in the next booth was watching anime on their phone without headphones, very quietly. The light was bad. The air smelled like instant ramen.

"You're coming home with me," I said.

I had not planned to say it. It just came out. Like a thing that had been waiting.

Shirase blinked. "What?"

"You're coming home with me. My mom's in Nagano this week. I have a spare room. You're going to sleep in a bed and take a shower and eat three meals and I'm going to — I'm going to figure out the rest. But you're not staying in a manga cafe. You're coming home with me."

She stared at me. "Akari, I'm—"

"If you say you're too old for me to take care of I'm going to slap you."

"I'm—"

I raised my hand. She stopped.

"Fine," she said. "Fine. Okay. I'll come."

"Good."

"But Akari—"

"Shut up. Drink your tea."

She drank her tea. I paid for her booth — she had been running a tab, four days overdue — and we walked to my apartment. It was the first time I had ever brought someone home. It was the first time I had ever wanted to.

She showered for forty-five minutes. She came out in my oversized hoodie and a pair of my sweatpants and her hair was wet and she looked, for the first time since I had met her, like a person instead of a ghost.

I made her dinner. I made her breakfast the next morning. I made her lunch. I went to school. I came back. She was still there. She had cleaned my kitchen. She had done my laundry. She had folded the laundry. She had organized my bookshelf. She had — I did not ask her to do any of this. She had just done it, because she was Shirase, and being still was not something she knew how to do.

She stayed for a week. Then she found a new job — the warehouse job, the one she still has — and she moved into her own apartment, the tiny one with the futon-couch and the sad cat stain, and she gave me a spare key, and she said, very quietly, "You can come over whenever you want. The door's open."

I came over the next day. And the next. And the next.

That was six months before the moon.

I tell you this because I want you to understand: what is happening now, between us, in this apartment, during the apocalypse — it is not new. It is the same thing that has been happening for a year and a half, since a park bench and a melon pan. The only thing that is new is the moon.

The moon has not changed us.

It has only made us louder.

Interlude I — Spring Before the Moon

(Shirase)

I want to tell you about the year before the moon. I want to tell you because Akari will not, and because the year before the moon is the year that made everything else possible, and because if I do not tell you about it you will think we went from park bench to apocalypse without anything in between, and that is not what happened.

What happened is: we had a year.

A year of Tuesdays. A year of onigiri and barley tea and egg sandwiches. A year of Akari showing up at my door at one in the afternoon with a convenience store bag and a look on her face. A year of her sitting on my couch reading yuri manga on her phone while I played video games at my desk. A year of her cooking dinner in my kitchen — actually cooking, with pots and pans and the stove, not just reheating convenience store food — and making me eat it, and washing the dishes afterward, and yelling at me about the state of the sponge. A year of her falling asleep on my couch at eleven and me pulling a blanket over her and going back to my desk. A year of her going home in the morning, and coming back the next afternoon, and the next, and the next.

A year.

I did not — I did not know what to do with a year. I had never had a year before. I had had weeks. I had had months. I had had, at the outside, a season. I had never had a person who came back. I had never had a person who kept coming back. I had — I had friends, before Akari. I had

the friend in Sapporo. I had people on the forum. I had coworkers, briefly, at the eleven jobs. I had — I had people. But I had never had a person who came back. I had never had a person who decided, somewhere along the line, that I was worth coming back to, and who then — kept coming back. Day after day. Week after week. Month after month.

I did not know what to do with it.

I did not know what to do with it the way you do not know what to do with a gift that is too big. You put it on the shelf. You look at it. You do not touch it. You are afraid that if you touch it, it will turn out to be a hallucination, or a mistake, or a thing with a catch. You are afraid that if you touch it, the person who gave it to you will realize they made a mistake and take it back.

So I did not touch it.

I let Akari come over. I let her cook. I let her clean. I let her organize my bookshelf and my kitchen and my closet and my life. I let her do all of it. I did not — I did not give anything back. I did not — I did not know how. I did not know what to give. I did not know what she wanted. I did not know — I did not know that what she wanted was for me to say *thank you* and *please* and *I love you* and *stay*. I did not know. I was twenty-two years old and I had been on a park bench and I had not — I had not been taught. I had not been taught the words. I had not been taught the gestures. I had not been taught the small daily things that people do for each other when they love each other, the *I made tea, do you want some* and *I noticed you were sad, can I sit with you* and *I'm here, I'm here, I'm here.*

I had not been taught.

Akari taught me.

She taught me without meaning to. She taught me by — by doing. She taught me by showing up. She taught me by — by being there, day after day, and by not asking for anything in return, and by — and by being patient, in the way that only Akari can be patient, which is impatiently. She taught me by yelling at me about the sponge. She taught me by handing me a cup of tea. She taught me by sitting on the couch and reading yuri manga while I played video games, by — by being in the room, by being in the same room, by being — by being a person who was in the same room as me, day after day, until I started to — until I started to believe that she would keep being in the same room as me, and that this was — that this was allowed.

It took a long time.

It took — it took most of the year.

There was a day, in the spring, about six months before the moon. I remember it. I was at my desk. I was playing — I think I was playing *Ruinverse*. The first one. The original. I had not finished it yet. I was — I was on hour forty of a fifty-hour run. I was in the part where the two leads are separated, the part where the shorter girl is in the city and the taller girl is in the mountains and they are both — they are both miserable, and they are both trying to get back to each other, and the game makes you play as both of them, alternating, and it is — it is a long part. It is the hardest part. It is the part where you have to be stubborn.

I was being stubborn. I had not slept in — I do not know. A day. Two days. I was being stubborn.

Akari came over. She had a key by then. She let herself in. She did not say anything. She went to the kitchen. She started cooking. I did not look up. She cooked for — I do not know. Half an hour. She made rice. She made miso. She made — she made tamagoyaki, which is a thing she only makes when she is — when she wants to be careful with me, when she has decided that I need a thing that is more than convenience store food, when she has decided that I need to be — to be cared for, in a way that takes time.

She brought it to me. At the desk. She put the tray down next to my keyboard. She put her hand on my shoulder. She did not say anything. She just — she put her hand on my shoulder. She left it there for a second. Then she took it away. She went back to the couch.

I kept playing.

I did not eat.

I did not eat for — I do not know. Twenty minutes. Thirty. The food got cold. I did not eat. I was — I was in the part of the game where the two leads are separated. I was being stubborn. I was — I was going to get them back together. I was going to do it tonight. I was going to — I was not going to sleep until I had done it.

Akari did not say anything.

Akari did not say anything for — for an hour. She sat on the couch. She read her manga. She did not — she did not yell at me. She did not — she did not insist. She just — she was there.

After an hour, I saved the game. I closed the laptop. I turned around.

She was on the couch. She was looking at me. She had — she had been waiting. She had been — she had been patient, in the way that only Akari can be patient, which is impatiently, which is to say she had been patient and she had been furious about being patient and she had been patient anyway.

"Eat," she said.

I ate.

I ate the cold rice and the cold miso and the cold tamagoyaki. I ate all of it. I did not — I did not taste it. I was too tired to taste it. But I ate it, because Akari had made it, and because Akari had waited, and because — because I had decided, somewhere in the back of my head, that I was going to — that I was going to learn. I was going to learn the words. I was going to learn the gestures. I was going to learn — I was going to learn what to do when someone loved me.

When I was done, I put the tray down. I looked at her.

"Akari," I said.

"What."

"Thank you."

"You don't have to—"

"Thank you. For — for the food. For — for waiting. For — for not yelling at me. For — for being here. For — I don't — I don't know how to — I don't know what to do with — with you. I don't know what to do with someone who — who comes back. I don't — I've never — I'm trying. I'm trying to

learn. I'm — thank you. For being patient. With me. While I learn."

She looked at me. Her face did — her face did a thing. A thing I had not seen before. A thing I did not have a word for. A thing that was — a thing that was — soft. A thing that was — was the opposite of the impatient patience, the opposite of the yelling about the sponge. A thing that was — was the thing underneath, the thing she kept hidden, the thing she did not show because she was Akari and Akari did not show.

"Shirase," she said.

"Yeah."

"You're already doing it."

"What?"

"You're already — you're already doing the thing. You're already — you're already learning. You already — you already said thank you. You already — you already ate. You already — you already turned around. You already — you already noticed. That's — that's the thing. That's all the thing is. Noticing. Saying thank you. Eating the food. Turning around. That's — that's all it is. You're already doing it. You've been doing it. You just — you just didn't know."

I looked at her. She looked at me.

"I'm — I'm not good at this," I said.

"I know."

"I'm — I'm going to be bad at it for a while."

"I know."

"I'm — I'm going to leave dishes in the sink."

"I know."

"I'm going to play video games at 3 AM."

"I know."

"I'm going to — I'm going to forget to eat. I'm going to — I'm going to not sleep for days. I'm going to — I'm going to be — me. I'm going to be me. And me is — me is a lot. Me is — me is too much. I know. I've been told. I've been told by — by everyone. By the eleven jobs. By the two apartments. By — by everyone. Me is too much. And you—"

"Shut up."

"Akari—"

"Shut up. Listen to me. You are — you are not too much. You are — you are exactly enough. You are — you are exactly the amount I want. You are — you leave dishes in the sink, fine. I will wash the dishes. You play video games at 3 AM, fine. I will turn off the monitor at 3:30. You forget to eat, fine. I will bring you onigiri. You do not sleep, fine. I will — I will — I will sit on the couch and read yuri manga and wait, and I will be patient, and I will be impatient about being patient, and I will be here. I will be here. I will — I will be here. That's — that's what I'm for. That's — I'm for being here. With you. For being here with you. For — for being the person who comes back. I — I want to be the person who comes back. I — I have wanted to be the person who comes back since the bench. Since the melon pan. Since — since you. I — let me. Please. Let me be the person who comes

back."

I looked at her. I — I did not know what to say. I did not — I did not have the words. I did not — I had not learned them yet. I was — I was still learning.

I got up. I went to the couch. I sat down next to her. I — I did not touch her. I did not — I did not know if I was allowed. I sat next to her, very close, and I did not touch her, and I said, "Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay — okay, you can be the person who comes back. Okay. I — I will try to be the person who — who is here. When you come back. I will — I will try. I will — I will leave the door unlocked. I will — I will give you a key. I will — I will — I will try."

She did not say anything.

She — she leaned against me. She put her head on my shoulder. She did not say anything. She just — she leaned. She leaned the way she had leaned in the park, that first night, except this time it was not because she was tired and had nowhere else to go. This time it was — this time it was because she wanted to. This time it was — this time it was a choice.

I did not move.

I did not move because moving would have broken the moment.

We sat there for — for a long time. For — for an hour, maybe. We did not talk. We did not — we did not need to talk. We had said the thing. The thing was said. The rest was — the rest was just being there. Being there

together. Being — being the people who were there.

That was the spring before the moon.

That was — that was the moment. The moment I started to learn. The moment I started to — to believe. The moment I started to — to let her be the person who came back.

I think about that moment a lot. I think about it — I think about it now, on the porch of the Tanaka house, five years later, with the moon in the sky and Akari in the fields. I think about it because — because it was the moment. The moment that made everything else possible. The moment that made the moon survivable. The moment that made the cult survivable. The moment that made the flood survivable. The moment that made — that made everything survivable.

Because Akari was the person who came back.

And I was the person who was there.

And we were — we were going to keep being those people.

For as long as the moon.

For — for longer than the moon.

For — for as long as we were stubborn.

Which was — which was going to be a long time.

Interlude III — The First Festival

(Shirase)

I want to tell you about the festival.

This was before the moon. This was — I do not remember exactly when. August, I think. The Niigata Festival. The one that happens every August, the one with the dancers and the food stalls and the fireworks over the Shinano River. The one that — that I had never been to, in all the years I had lived in Niigata, because — because I was — was me. Because — because I did not — did not do festivals. Because — because festivals were — were for people who — who had people, and — and I did not — did not have people.

But Akari wanted to go.

Akari wanted to go because — because she had — had read about it. She had — had read about it in — in a yuri manga, of all places. She had — had read a yuri manga where — where the two girls went to a festival, and — and they wore yukata, and — and they watched the fireworks, and — and one of them held the other's hand, and — and Akari had — had read this, and — and had closed the manga, and — and had looked at me, and — and had said *we're going*.

I had said *what*.

She had said *the Niigata Festival. We're going. This weekend. We're going*.

I had said *Akari, I don't—*

She had said *we're going*.

We went.

I did not have a yukata. I had never owned a yukata. I had — had not worn a yukata since — since I was a child, since — since my mother had — had bought me one, when I was six, when — when my father had — had still been — been there, when — when we had — had gone to a festival, the — the three of us, when — when we had — had been a family, briefly, for — for one evening, in — in yukata.

I did not tell Akari this.

Akari had a yukata. Akari had — had a yukata that — that her mother had — had bought her, when — when she was fifteen, that — that she had — had worn once, that — that was — was in her closet, that — that she had — had brought to my apartment, that — that she was — was going to wear. The yukata was — was pale blue, with — with pink flowers. It was — was beautiful. Akari in the yukata was — was beautiful. I — I did not tell her this either.

I did not have a yukata, so — so I wore — I wore jeans. I wore a — a t-shirt. I wore — I wore my sneakers. I — I looked like — like I looked every day. I — I looked like — like a twenty-two-year-old woman who — who had never owned a yukata, who — who had not been to a festival since she was six, who — who was — was going to a festival with — with a seventeen-year-old girl who — who was wearing a yukata, and — and who was — was going to feel — feel out of place.

I felt out of place.

We walked to the festival. The streets were — were full. The streets were — were full of people in yukata, full of — of families, full of — of

couples, full of — of children, full of — of the smell of — of yakisoba and — and takoyaki and — and cotton candy. The streets were — were full of — of the things that — that festivals are full of. The streets were — were full of — of the things that — that I had — had not — had not been part of, in — in twenty years.

I walked next to Akari. Akari in the yukata. Akari with — with her hair up, in — in a — a half-ponytail, with — with a pink flower pin that — that she had — had bought, that — that she had — had put in herself, that — that I had — had watched her put in, in — in the bathroom mirror, that — that I had — had wanted to — to help with, that — that I had — had not — had not helped with, because — because I was — was a coward.

We walked.

Akari was — was looking at everything. Akari was — was looking at the — the stalls, the — the games, the — the food. Akari was — was looking at the — the people, the — the yukata, the — the children. Akari was — was looking at — at the festival with — with the eyes of — of someone who — who had — had not — had not been to — to a festival in — in a long time, either. Akari was — was looking at — at the festival with — with the same eyes I was — was looking at it with. Akari was — was looking at — at the festival with — with hungry eyes.

I had not — I had not known that — that about Akari. I had not — had not known that — that Akari had — had not — had not been to a festival in — in a long time. I had — had assumed — had assumed that — that Akari, the — the daughter of — of the lawyer, the — the girl with — with the spreadsheet, the — the girl who — who went to — to the best school, the — the girl who — who had — had money, had — had been to — to

festivals. I had — had assumed that — that Akari's life had — had been full of — of festivals, full of — of the things that — that my life had — had not been full of.

I had been wrong.

Akari had — had not been to a festival since — since she was a child. Akari's mother had — had not — had not taken her. Akari's mother had — had been — been too busy. Akari's mother had — had been — been at the office. Akari had — had been — been at home, with — with the nanny, with — with the spreadsheet, with — with the — the nothing.

Akari was — was at the festival for — for the first time in — in ten years.

Akari was — was at the festival with — with me.

I — I did not — did not know what to — to do with that.

We walked through the festival. We ate yakisoba. We ate takoyaki. We — we played a game, the — the goldfish-scooping game, and — and Akari was — was terrible at it, and — and I was — was worse, and — and we did not — did not catch any goldfish, and — and we laughed, and — and the laughing was — was the — the first laughing I had — had done in — in a long time, the — the first laughing that — that was — was not — not a — a performance, the — the first laughing that — that was — was just — just laughing, just — just because — because we were — were together, and — and it was — was funny, and — and we were — were laughing.

We laughed.

We walked to the river. The — the fireworks were — were going to —

to start. We — we found a place on the — the bank, on the — the grass, next to — to a family with — with two small children, next to — to a couple who — who were — were holding hands, next to — to a group of — of high school girls who — who were — were taking — taking selfies. We — we sat down. We — we sat on the grass, and — and we waited for the — the fireworks.

The fireworks started.

The fireworks were — were beautiful. The fireworks were — were the — the Niigata Festival fireworks, the — the big ones, the — the ones that — that go — go off over the — the river, the — the ones that — that you can — can see from — from anywhere in the city. The fireworks were — were huge, and — and loud, and — and colorful, and — and they went — went off, one — one after another, for — for an hour.

I did not — I did not watch the fireworks.

I — I watched Akari.

I watched Akari watch the fireworks. I — I watched the — the light from the — the fireworks on — on her face. I — I watched the — the colors, the — the red and — and the gold and — and the blue, on — on her face. I — I watched her — her eyes, the — her eyes wide, the — her eyes reflecting the — the fireworks, the — her eyes full of — of the — the fireworks, full of — of the — the light, full of — of the — the — full of — of something I — I did not — did not have a — a word for.

I watched her.

I — I wanted to — to hold her hand.

I — I did not — did not hold her hand.

I — I wanted to — to put my — my arm around her.

I — I did not — did not put my arm around her.

I — I wanted to — to lean — lean against her, to — to put my — my head on — on her shoulder, to — to be — be close to her, to — to be — be near her, to — to be — be with her, in — in the way that — that the girls in — in the yuri manga were — were with each other, in — in the way that — that the couple next to us was — was with each other, in — in the way that — that people who — who loved each other were — were with each other.

I did not — I did not do any of those things.

I — I sat next to her, and — and I watched the fireworks, and — and I watched her, and — and I did not — did not touch her. Because — because I was — was a coward. Because — because I was — was twenty-two, and — and she was — was seventeen, and — and I did not — did not think I was — was allowed. Because — because I did not — did not think — did not think I was — was the kind of — of person who — who got to — to touch — to touch the — the person they — they loved. Because — because I was — was me, and — and she was — was her, and — and the distance between us was — was the distance between me and — and everything I had — had ever wanted.

The fireworks ended.

We — we walked home. We — we walked through the — the streets, through the — the crowds, through the — the stalls that — that were —

were closing. We — we walked in — in silence, mostly. Akari was — was tired. I was — was tired. The — the walking was — was slow. The — the night was — was warm. The — the moon was — was up, the — the normal moon, the — the moon at — at its normal distance, the — the moon that — that nobody was — was worried about.

We got to — to my apartment. We — we went up. We — we went in. Akari — Akari took off her — her geta, the — the sandals she had — had worn with — with the yukata. She — she went to the — the bathroom, to — to change. She — she came out in — in her — her regular clothes, in — in the — the shorts and — and the t-shirt she — she slept in. She — she had — had taken off the — the flower pin. She — she had — had let her — her hair down. She — she looked — she looked like — like Akari, again. She — she looked like — like the girl I — I knew.

She — she sat down on the — the couch. She — she looked at me.

"Shirase," she said.

"Yeah."

"Tonight was — was good."

"Yeah. It was."

"I — I haven't been to a festival since — since I was a kid."

"I know. I figured."

"How did you figure?"

"You looked at everything like — like you were seeing it for the first time."

She — she did not say anything for — for a second. She — she looked at me.

"Yeah," she said. "I was. I — I was seeing it for the first time. I — I was seeing it with — with you."

I — I did not — did not know what to — to say.

"Shirase," she said.

"Yeah."

"Next year. We'll — we'll go again. Next year."

"Yeah. Okay. Next year."

"And — and next year, you'll wear a yukata."

"Akari—"

"You'll wear a yukata. I'll — I'll find one. I'll — I'll find you one. You'll — you'll wear it. We'll — we'll go. Together. Next year."

I — I looked at her. She — she was looking at me with — with the — the eyes, the — the eyes I had — had seen in — in the — the yuri manga, the — the eyes that — that I had — had thought were — were only in — in the yuri manga, the — the eyes that — that were — were not — not in — in real life, the — the eyes that — that were — were for — for the — the page, not — not for — for the — the world.

The eyes were in the world.

The eyes were in — in my apartment.

The eyes were on — on Akari's face.

The eyes were — were looking at — at me.

I — I did not — did not know what to — to do.

I — I wanted to — to kiss her.

I — I did not — did not kiss her.

I — I said *okay. Next year. I'll wear a yukata.*

She — she smiled. The — the small smile. The — the smile I had — had not — had not seen before, the — the smile I would — would see — see again, the — the smile that — that I would — would fall in — in love with, the — the smile that — that I was — was already in — in love with, the — the smile that — that I — I did not — did not know I — I was in — in love with yet.

She — she smiled. She — she went to — to bed. She — she fell asleep on — on the couch. I — I pulled a — a blanket over her. I — I went to — to my desk. I — I did not — did not play — play a game. I — I sat at — at the desk, and — and I — I looked at — at the — the ceiling, at — at the stain that — that looked like — like a sad cat, at — at the — the apartment, at — at the — the sleeping girl on — on the couch, at — at the — the whole — the whole thing.

I — I sat there for — for a long time.

I — I sat there, and — and I — I thought about — about the festival, about — about the fireworks, about — about Akari in — in the yukata, about — about the — the eyes. I — I thought about — about next year.

About — about the yukata she — she was going to — to find me. About — about going — going to — to the festival, together, in — in yukata, the — the way the — the girls in — in the yuri manga went to — to festivals, the — the way the — the couple next to us — us had — had been, the — the way people who — who loved each other — each other went to — to festivals.

I thought about it.

I — I did not — did not think — did not think it was — was possible. I — I did not — did not think — did not think I was — was the kind of — of person who — who got — got that. I — I did not — did not think — did not think I was — was allowed.

But — but Akari — Akari thought — thought I was allowed.

Akari — Akari thought — thought I was — was the kind of — of person who — who got — got that.

Akari — Akari thought — thought a lot of — of things about me that — that I did not — did not think about — about myself.

I — I sat at — at the desk, and — and I — I let — let her think them.

I — I let her think them, because — because I — I did not — did not know how to — to think them — them myself, and — and because — because letting her — her think them was — was the — the closest I — I could get — get to — to thinking them — them myself.

I — I sat there for — for a long time.

Then — then I went to — to bed.

The — the next year — the next year was — was the year the — the moon started — started falling.

We — we did not — did not go to — to the festival — festival next year.

We — we went to — to the festival — festival five years later, in — in Sakae, in — in the small village — village festival, with — with the — the whole village, with — with the — the old man, with — with the — the children, with — with the — the farmers. We — we went. I — I wore a — a yukata. Akari — Akari found it for me. Akari — Akari found it in — in Nagoya, on — on a trip, the — the year before. The yukata was — was dark blue, with — with white waves. It — it fit. It — it fit perfectly. Akari — Akari had — had guessed my — my size right. Akari — Akari had — had a good — good eye for — for outfits. I — I had — had known that — that about her. I — I had — had known that — that about her for — for years.

We — we went to — to the festival — festival in — in yukata, together, the — the way — way we had — had said we — we would, the — the way — way Akari had — had said we — we would, the — the way — way I — I had — had agreed to, the — the way — way we — we had — had promised, five — five years before, in — in my apartment, on — on the — the night of — of the — the Niigata Festival, before — before the moon.

We went.

We held hands.

We — we held hands, in — in public, at — at the festival, in — in front of — of the — the whole village. We — we held hands, and — and nobody — nobody said — said anything, and — and nobody — nobody looked — looked twice, and — and the — the old man — the old man smiled, and —

and the — the children — the children ran — ran around — around us, and — and the — the festival — the festival was — was a — a festival, and — and we — we were — were at — at it, and — and we — we were — were together, and — and we — we were — were in — in love, and — and we — we were — were wearing — wearing yukata, and — and we — we were — were holding — holding hands.

We held hands.

It — it was — was the — the first time I — I had — had held her — her hand in — in public. It — it was — was the — the first time I — I had — had held her — her hand, at — at all, since — since the — the stream crossing, the — the day of — of the flood. We — we had — had been — been together for — for years, by — by then. We — we had — had been — been married, by — by then, in — in the — the village ceremony. But — but we — we had — had not — had not held — held hands in — in public. We — we had — had been — been careful. We — we had — had been — been private. We — we had — had kept — kept the — the touching for — for the — the house, for — for the — the futon, for — for the — the dark.

We — we held hands.

At — at the festival. In — in public. In — in front of — of the — the whole village.

And — and the — the world did not — did not end.

The — the moon did not — did not fall.

The — the sky did not — did not crack.

Nothing — nothing happened.

We — we held hands, and — and nothing happened, and — and that — that was — was the — the most — the most remarkable — remarkable thing — thing that — that had — had ever — ever happened — happened to — to me.

Nothing — nothing happened.

We — we were — were allowed.

We — we were — were allowed to — to hold — hold hands.

We — we were — were allowed to — to be — be together.

We — we were — were allowed to — to be — be in — in love.

We — we were — were allowed.

We — we were — were allowed.

I tell you about the festival because — because the festival is — is the thing. The festival is — is the — the promise. The festival is — is the — the thing Akari — Akari promised, five — five years before, in — in my apartment, on — on the night of — of the — the Niigata Festival. The festival is — is the — the thing she — she said — said we — we would — would do, and — and we — we did — did it, and — and it — it was — was everything — everything she — she said — said it — it would — would be.

The festival is — is the — the proof.

The festival is — is the — the proof that — that the — the things — the things you — you promise — promise at — at one in — in the morning, in — in a — a small apartment, in — in Niigata, to — to a — a girl you — you love, the — the things — the things you — you think — think you — you are —

are not — not allowed — allowed to — to promise — promise — those — those things — things can — can come — come true.

The festival came true.

The yukata came true.

The holding hands came true.

We — we came true.

I — I am — am telling — telling you — you about — about the — the festival — festival because — because the — the festival — festival is — is the — the reason — reason to — to keep — keep going. The — the festival — festival is — is the — the reason — reason to — to be — be stubborn. The — the festival — festival is — is the — the reason — reason to — to not — not give — give up.

Because — because the — the things — things you — you promise — promise at — at one in — in the morning — morning can — can come — come true.

They — they can.

They — they do.

I — I am — am living — living proof.

Chapter 8 — First Wave

(Shirase)

The first earthquake hit on a Thursday. Eight weeks after the NHK banner. Two weeks after the moon became visible during the day.

I was at the warehouse. Night shift. Three in the morning. Unloading a container of imported auto parts, which is exactly as exciting as it sounds. I had my earbuds in. I was listening to a podcast about the history of the Shinano River, because I am the kind of person who listens to podcasts about rivers at three in the morning, and because I had decided that if I was going to live next to a river that was going to flood I should probably know its history.

The earthquake did not announce itself.

It just — arrived. A low rolling thing, the kind that does not shake so much as tilt, like the world was a table and someone had lifted one leg. I stopped what I was doing. I pulled out an earbud. I waited. The container I was unloading groaned. The overhead lights swayed. Somewhere in the warehouse, something metal fell off a shelf and hit the floor with a sound like a gunshot.

The shift supervisor — Taniguchi-san, sixty years old, been doing this since before I was born — started yelling. *Earthquake. Earthquake. Get away from the containers. Outside. Outside now.*

I went outside. The whole night shift went outside. We stood in the parking lot in our hi-vis vests and we watched the lamps on the warehouse roof sway, and the ground rolled under our feet like the deck

of a ship, and it kept rolling, for what felt like a very long time but was probably ninety seconds.

Then it stopped.

Taniguchi-san called roll. Everyone was there. He told us to go home. *Shift's over,* he said. *Don't come in tomorrow. Wait for the call.*

I rode my bike home. It took forty minutes, because the streets were chaos — cars stopped in the middle of intersections, people standing outside their houses in pajamas, a convenience store with its window broken, glass on the sidewalk. The moon was overhead. It was huge. It was, I would guess, twenty percent larger than it had been two months ago. It threw a light that was not right. It was too bright. Too flat. The shadows it cast were the wrong color.

I got home at four-thirty. Akari was on the balcony.

She was in her pajamas — my pajamas, technically, an oversized t-shirt and shorts she had stolen — and she had her phone in her hand and she was looking at the moon. When she heard me come up the stairs she turned around, and the look on her face was — I do not have a word for it. Relief. Anger. Fear. Love, maybe, but I am not allowed to use that word yet.

"You're okay," she said.

"I'm okay."

"You didn't call."

"The cell towers are jammed."

"You didn't call."

"I'm sorry. I'm here. I'm okay."

She did not move. She was shaking. I could see it from across the balcony. Her hands, the hands with the little silver stars, were trembling.

"Akari."

"Get inside. We need to — there's been — get inside."

I got inside. She showed me her phone. Twitter. Video. The coast. The earthquake had been a 6.8 off the coast of Niigata, and the tsunami warning was up, and there was footage — shaky phone footage, the kind where you can hear the person filming breathing — of water coming into Kashiwazaki. Not a wall of water. Not a movie tsunami. Just — water. Water where water should not be. Water rising, fast, in streets that had been dry ten minutes before.

"The moon," Akari said. Her voice was very flat. "The tidal forces."

"Yeah."

"This is going to keep happening."

"Yeah."

"Get the bag."

I got the bag. We had packed it three weeks ago, in the back of the notebook. *Go-bag.* Two changes of clothes each. Toiletries. First aid kit. Cash. Copies of our IDs. The notebook. The paper maps. A flashlight. Batteries. A hand-crank radio. Two liters of water. Three days of protein

bars. A small cooking pot. A lighter. A knife — Akari had bought it, a small folding knife with a pink handle, and she had practiced with it, in the apartment, until she could open and close it one-handed, and I had not said anything because saying anything would have broken the spell.

"Where are we going?" I said.

"Nowhere. Not yet. We wait. We watch. The tsunami warning is for the coast. We're inland. We're thirty meters above sea level. We're fine for now."

"But—"

"We watch. We wait. We listen to the radio. If the river floods, we go. If the power goes out, we go. If the crowds start, we go. Until then, we're safer here than on the road."

She said all of this in the same flat voice. She had rehearsed it. I could tell. She had been sitting on the balcony for an hour, since the earthquake, waiting for me to come home, and she had rehearsed what she was going to say, and she was saying it.

I looked at her.

"Akari."

"What."

"You should sleep."

"I'm not sleeping."

"You haven't slept since the earthquake."

"I'm not sleeping. One of us has to be awake. You're about to drop."

"I'm—"

"You're about to drop. I can see it. Your hands are shaking. You drove home on a bike after a six-point-eight with no sleep and you've been awake for — how long?"

I did the math. "Twenty-two hours."

"Go to bed."

"Akari—"

"Go to bed, Shirase. I will wake you up if anything happens. I promise. I will not let anything happen. Go."

I went. I did not argue. I was too tired to argue. I lay down on the futon and I closed my eyes and I was asleep in about ninety seconds.

I slept for six hours.

When I woke up, Akari was asleep on the floor next to the futon, with her head on a pillow she had dragged in from the couch, and the radio was on very quietly next to her, and her hand was on the radio, and even in her sleep she was listening to it.

I did not wake her up.

I went to the kitchen. I made rice. I made miso soup. I opened a can of mackerel. I made breakfast. I ate half of it. I left the other half on the counter for her, covered, with a note that said *eat this, do not skip*.

I went back to the living room. I sat at the table. I opened the laptop. I

checked the news.

The news was not good.

The earthquake had been the third in a week. The tidal flooding on the coast was getting worse. Kashiwazaki was underwater. Nagaoka was on evacuation notice. The government was — the government was saying words, but the words were not adding up to anything. The Prime Minister was on television again. He looked like he had aged ten years in two months. He said *we are doing everything we can*, and I believed him, because I think he was, and I also knew that it was not going to be enough, because there was no enough, because the moon was a rock and rocks do not negotiate.

I read for an hour.

Then I read another hour.

Then Akari came out of the bedroom, with her hair messed up and the note in her hand, and she said, "You didn't wake me up."

"You needed to sleep."

"You need to sleep too."

"I slept."

"Six hours is not sleeping. Six hours is a nap."

"It's more than you got."

She did not answer this. She ate the breakfast I had left her. She ate it standing at the counter, not sitting, and she ate it fast, the way she ate

when she was upset. When she was done she put the bowl in the sink and she ran water on it — she did not wash it, just ran water, which is a thing she does when she is too upset to wash properly — and she turned around.

"Shirase."

"Yeah."

"I think we should go."

I looked at her. "Phase Two?"

"Phase Two."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. The river's going to flood. The earthquake's going to keep happening. The crowds are going to start. We should go now, while the roads are still passable. While we still can."

I looked at the map on my laptop. I looked at the notebook. I looked at her.

"Okay," I said. "Phase Two. Let's go."

She nodded. She did not cry. She did not hesitate. She went to the bedroom and she came back in three minutes dressed in her jirai kei — black lace, pink ribbons, the platform boots, the choker — and I almost laughed, because who dresses like that for the apocalypse, but I did not laugh, because I knew why. The jirai kei was hers. The jirai kei was the one thing in her wardrobe that was entirely hers, that her mother had not chosen, that the world had not chosen. She was going into the apocalypse

as herself.

I understood.

I changed too. I put on my rattiest jeans and my rattiest hoodie and my most comfortable sneakers, because I knew we were going to walk, and walking was going to be the most important thing we did for the next three days.

We packed. We divided the supplies between two backpacks — mine heavier, because I was used to carrying containers at the warehouse and Akari was not. We checked the apartment. We turned off the gas. We locked the door.

We stood in the genkan with our packs on.

"Akari."

"Yeah."

"You ready?"

She looked at me. Her eyes were very wide. Her mouth did the complicated thing.

"No," she said. "But let's go anyway."

We went.

Outside, the moon was setting in the west, and the sun was rising in the east, and the two of them were in the sky at the same time, and the sky was wrong, the sky was the wrong color, the sky was the color of a bruise, and the air smelled like rain.

We walked south.

We did not look back.

Chapter 9 — North

(Shirase)

We did not, in the end, go south. We went north.

We had been planning to go south because the map said south — south to Route 17, then inland along the river valley to Muikamachi, then up into the mountains. This was the plan. I had memorized the plan. The plan was a good plan.

The plan died at the intersection of Route 8 and the Bandai bypass, three kilometers from my apartment, at seven in the morning on the day we left.

The intersection was a parking lot. Not a metaphor. An actual parking lot. Cars, trucks, buses, motorcycles, scooters, bicycles, all of them stopped, all of them not moving, all of them full of people who had also had plans and whose plans had also been to go south.

I stood at the edge of the overpass and looked at the traffic and I felt a thing I had not felt in a long time. I felt the temptation to give up. I felt it like a hand on my shoulder. *The road is full*, the hand said. *You can't walk through that. You can't walk around that. You're one woman with a backpack and a seventeen-year-old girl and you think you're going to out stubborn the entire population of Niigata trying to flee south at the same time. Go home. Lie on the futon. Wait for the moon.*

I stood there for about ten seconds.

Then I said, very quietly, "No."

Akari looked at me. "No what?"

"No. We're not going south."

"The plan says south."

"The plan is wrong. Look at it. The whole city is going south. Route 17 is going to be a parking lot all the way to Nagaoka. We'll be on that road for a week. We'll be sitting targets."

"Then what?"

"North."

"North is the coast."

"North is Route 7 along the coast for the first twenty kilometers, then it cuts inland at Shibata. Then we follow the Agano River valley to the mountains. There's less population up there. Less traffic. Less competition for supplies."

"Also a tsunami warning."

"Tsunami warning is for the coast. We're not staying on the coast. We're cutting inland at Shibata. The road to Shibata is forty meters above sea level for most of the way. We'll be fine."

"Shirase—"

"You got a better idea?"

She did not answer this. She looked at me. She looked at the parking lot below us. She looked at me again.

"Fine," she said. "North. Lead the way."

I led the way.

We cut back through the city, away from the traffic, through residential streets I knew because I had biked them on the way to the warehouse for two years. We did not talk much. The streets were not empty — there were people everywhere, people with suitcases, people with children, people with dogs, people with carts, all of them moving in the same direction we were moving, which was away — but they were not gridlocked. They were walking. We were walking. We were all walking.

Akari walked next to me. She did not fall behind. She kept pace, step for step, the platform boots of hers hitting the pavement with a steady *clack-clack-clack* that I focused on, because focusing on it kept me from focusing on the sky.

The sky was wrong.

I have said this already. I will say it again. The sky was wrong. The moon was overhead, even at seven in the morning, because the moon's orbit had shifted in ways I did not understand and the moon was now overhead almost all the time, and the moon was huge, and the light it threw was the wrong color, and the shadows it cast were the wrong shape, and the whole sky looked like someone had taken a photograph of the sky and put a filter on it that nobody had asked for.

We walked for four hours.

We stopped at a convenience store on the edge of the city. The convenience store was open. I had not expected it to be open. The clerk

was a woman in her fifties, very calm, very methodical, scanning items like it was any other day. The shelves were half-empty. We bought what we could — two more bottles of water, four onigiri, a pack of wet wipes, a bag of dried squid, a pack of gum — and we paid in cash, and the woman said *be careful out there*, and I said *you too*, and we left.

At the edge of the city, the road turned into countryside.

I had not been out of Niigata in two years. I had forgotten what countryside looked like. Rice paddies, still flooded from the recent rains, the water reflecting the wrong-colored sky. Farmhouses, mostly shuttered. The occasional car, going too fast in the wrong direction. A dog, loose, running along the side of the road, no owner in sight.

We walked.

Akari did not complain. She did not ask to stop. She did not ask how much farther. She just walked, her boots going *clack-clack-clack*, her backpack on her shoulders, her hair tied back in a ponytail I had not seen her do before. She had done it while walking. I had not noticed.

At noon we stopped in a bus shelter outside a village called Kurosaki. We sat on the bench. We ate onigiri. We did not talk. Akari handed me a bottle of water. I drank half. She drank the other half.

"How are your feet?" I asked.

"Fine."

"Liar."

"Fine enough."

"Show me."

She rolled her eyes. But she pulled off her right boot — the platform boot, which was ridiculous for walking but which she was wearing because she was Akari — and there was a blister on her heel, the kind that was going to be a problem in another ten kilometers.

"Let me," I said.

"You don't have to—"

"Let me."

She let me. I got the first aid kit out of her pack. I cleaned the blister. I put a bandage on it. I put a second bandage on it. I put moleskin over the bandages. I did the same to the other foot, which had a blister starting but not yet bloomed.

"Better?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Next time wear sensible shoes to the apocalypse."

"These are sensible shoes."

"These are not sensible shoes, Akari. These are shoes that say *I am a jirai kei girl and the apocalypse can fight me.*"

She almost smiled. Almost. "Yeah. That's the point."

I put the kit away. She put her boots back on. We stood up. We walked.

We walked all afternoon.

By evening we were in Shibata. Shibata was a small city, thirty thousand people, inland enough that the tsunami warning did not apply. It was full. Not gridlocked. Full. People everywhere. The restaurants were open but the lines were long. The hotels were full. The train station was closed.

We found a park on the east side of the city, away from the center, away from the crowds. It had a gazebo. We set up in the gazebo. We ate protein bars and dried squid and a can of mackerel. We drank water. We did not talk.

It got dark.

The moon rose.

It rose in the east, the way it always does, except it did not look the way it always does. It was — I am going to have to find words for this, because I do not think there are words for this — it was *close*. Close the way a streetlight is close. Close the way a face in a window is close. The craters on it were visible without squinting. The seas on it were the size of dinner plates. The whole lower hemisphere hung over the horizon like a — like a thing too big to be there. Like a thing that had no business being there. Like a thing that was there anyway.

We looked at it.

Akari said, very quietly, "It's beautiful."

It was. That was the awful thing. It was beautiful. The light it threw was a cold silver-blue, the color of computer screens in a dark room, and

it lit the whole park like a stadium, and the shadows were knife-sharp, and the gazebo we were sitting in was outlined on the grass like a woodcut.

"It's beautiful," she said again.

"Yeah."

"Shirase."

"Yeah."

"Are we going to make it?"

I looked at her. She was sitting on the bench of the gazebo with her knees pulled up to her chest — the way she had been sitting on the park bench the night I met her, the irony of which was not lost on me — and she was looking at the moon, and her face in the moonlight was — her face in the moonlight was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. More beautiful than the moon. More beautiful than the sky.

I should have said *yes*. I should have said *we're going to make it*. I should have said *I won't let us not make it*.

"We're going to make it," I said.

She looked at me. "You don't know that."

"I know. But I'm going to make it true. The same way I made it true when I said you were going to be okay. The same way I make everything true. I'm going to be too stubborn to let it be false."

She looked at me for a long time. The moon threw her shadow on the grass behind her. Her shadow was sharp and dark and definite.

"You're insane," she said.

"I know."

"You're completely insane."

"I know."

She did not say anything for a long moment. Then she shifted on the bench. She moved closer to me. She leaned against my shoulder. She did not say anything. She just leaned.

I did not move.

I did not move because moving would have broken the moment.

We sat there for a long time. The moon rose higher. The light got brighter. The shadows got sharper. The world got colder.

We did not talk.

After a while, Akari's breathing evened out. She had fallen asleep on my shoulder. I sat there, with her weight against me, and I watched the moon climb the sky, and I thought about all the things I was going to do, in the morning, and the morning after that, and the morning after that, and I thought about how stubborn I was, and I thought about how stubborn she was, and I thought about how the moon was going to learn that about us.

The moon did not learn it that night.

But it would.

Chapter 9.5 — On the Road

(Shirase)

I want to tell you about the road.

I have told you about the road in pieces. I have told you about the traffic. I have told you about the decision to go north. I have told you about the convenience store, and the rice paddies, and the bus shelter outside Kurosaki, and the blisters on Akari's feet. I have not told you about the people.

There were people on the road.

I have not told you about the people because — because the people were — were hard. The people were — were the hardest part. The people were — were harder than the traffic, harder than the walking, harder than the blisters, harder than the moon. The people were — were the thing that — that I — I think about, still, at — at 3 AM, when — when I cannot sleep.

I will tell you about the people.

The first person was — was a woman at the convenience store. The convenience store where — where we had stopped, the — the one on — on the edge of — of the city. The woman was — was in — in the parking lot. She was — was standing next to — to a car. The car was — was full. The car was — was full of — of things — of — of suitcases, of — of bags, of — of boxes, of — of the — the contents of — of a — a life. The car was — was so full that — that the — the woman could not — could not get — get in. She was — was standing next to — to the car, and — and she was —

was trying to — to figure out — figure out what — what to — to leave — leave behind.

She was crying.

She was crying the — the quiet kind, the — the kind where — where the — the tears just — just come, and — and you do not — do not wipe — wipe them, and — and they just — just fall. She was crying, and — and she was — was trying to — to figure out — figure out what — what to — to leave — leave behind, and — and she could not — could not figure — figure it out, and — and so — so she just — just stood — stood there, crying, next to — to the — the car.

We — we walked past her.

I — I did not — did not stop. I — I did not — did not say — say anything. I — I walked — walked past her. Akari — Akari walked — walked past her. We — we walked — walked past her, into — into the — the store, and — and we bought — bought our — our water and — and our — our onigiri, and — and we walked — walked out, and — and the — the woman was — was still — still there, still — still crying, still — still trying to — to figure — figure it out.

I — I did not — did not stop.

I — I should have — should have stopped. I — I should have — should have said — said something. I — I should have — should have helped. I — I should have — should have — should have done — done something. I — I did not — did not do — do anything. I — I walked — walked past. I — I kept — kept walking. I — I did not — did not look — look back.

I have — have thought — thought about — about that — that woman, every — every day, since. I — I have thought — thought about — about her, at — at 3 AM, when — when I cannot — cannot sleep. I — I have thought — thought about — about what — what she — she was — was leaving — leaving behind. I — I have thought — thought about — about whether — whether she — she got — got in — in the — the car, eventually. I — I have thought — thought about — about whether — whether she — she made — made it — made it to — to wherever — wherever she — she was — was going. I — I have thought — thought about — about her, and — and I — I have — have not — not thought — thought about — about her with — with anything — anything but — but guilt.

I did not — did not stop.

I tell you — I tell you about — about her because — because she — she is — is the — the first — the first person — person I — I did not — did not stop — stop for, on — on the — the road. She — she was — was not — was not the — the last.

The second person was — was a man, on — on the second day, on — on the road between — between Shibata and — and the mountains. The man was — was old. Maybe — maybe seventy. He was — was sitting on — on the side — side of — of the — the road, on — on a — a guardrail, with — with his — his head — head in — in his — his hands. He was — was not — was not crying. He was — was just — just sitting. He was — was just — just sitting there, with — with his — his head — head in — in his — his hands, and — and he was — was not — was not moving.

We — we walked — walked past him.

I — I did not — did not stop. Akari — Akari did not — did not stop. We — we walked — walked past.

I have — have thought — thought about — about him — him too.

The third person was — was a child. The — the child was — was a — a girl. Maybe — maybe five. She — she was — was standing — standing in — in the — the middle — middle of — of the — the road, in — in a — a village — village we — we walked — walked through, on — on the — the second — second day. She — she was — was just — just standing — standing there. She — she was — was not — was not with — with anyone. She — she was — was not — was not crying. She — she was — was just — just standing — standing in — in the — the middle — middle of — of the — the road, looking — looking at — at us.

I — I stopped.

I — I stopped because — because she — she was — was a — a child. I — I stopped because — because she — she was — was alone. I — I stopped because — because — because I — I could not — could not walk — walk past — past a — a child.

I — I went — went up — up to — to her. I — I said *hey. Hey. Are you — are you okay? Are — are you lost? Where — where is — is your — your mom — your mom and — and dad?*

She — she did not — did not say — say anything. She — she looked — looked at — at me. She — she had — had the — the eyes. The — the nothing — the nothing eyes. The — the eyes I — I had — had had, on — on the — the bench. The — the eyes that — that Akari — Akari had — had had, in — in the — the karaoke — the karaoke box. The — the nothing —

the nothing eyes, in — in the — the face of — of a — a five-year-old — five-year-old girl.

I — I did not — did not know — know what — what to — to do.

I — I looked — looked at — at Akari. Akari — Akari was — was standing — standing behind — behind me. Akari — Akari was — was looking — looking at — at the — the girl. Akari — Akari had — had the — the face — the face she — she had — had when — when she — she was — was trying — trying not — not to — to cry.

"Shirase," Akari said.

"Yeah."

"We can't — we can't take her."

"I know."

"We — we don't — we don't know — know where — where she — she came — came from. We — we don't — we don't know — know who — who she — she belongs — belongs to. We — we can't — we can't just — just take — take her."

"I know."

"But — but we can't — we can't leave — leave her."

"I know."

We — we stood — stood there. We — we stood — stood there, in — in the — the middle — middle of — of the — the road, in — in the — the village, with — with the — the girl. We — we stood — stood there for — for

a — a long — long time.

Then — then a — a woman — a woman came — came out — out of — of a — a house. The — the woman was — was old. Maybe — maybe sixty. She — she was — was the — the girl's — girl's grandmother. She — she had — had been — been looking — looking for — for the — the girl. The — the girl — girl had — had wandered — wandered off. The — the woman — woman was — was relieved — relieved to — to find — find her. She — she thanked — thanked us. She — she took — took the — the girl — girl inside. She — she did not — did not invite — invite us — us in.

We — we walked — walked on.

I — I did not — did not look — look back.

But — but I — I think — think about — about the — the girl. I — I think — think about — about the — the nothing — nothing in — in her — her eyes. I — I think — think about — about whether — whether she — she is — is okay, now, five — five years — five years later. I — I think — think about — about whether — whether the — the nothing — nothing went — went away, or — or whether — whether it — it stayed. I — I think — think about — about her.

The fourth person was — was a man at — at a — a gas station, on — on the — the third — third day. The man was — was the — the attendant. The — the gas — gas station — station was — was out — out of — of gas. The — the man was — was standing — standing in — in the — the booth, doing — doing nothing. The — the pumps — pumps were — were off. The — the station — station was — was closed. But — but the — the man — man was — was there, standing — standing in — in the — the booth, doing — doing

nothing.

We — we stopped. We — we asked — asked if — if he — he had — had water. He — he said — said yes. He — he sold — sold us — us two — two bottles. He — he did not — did not charge — charge us — us much. He — he looked — looked at — at us — us — at — at our — our packs, at — at our — our clothes, at — at our — our faces — faces — and — and he — he said *where — where are — are you — you going?*

I — I said *north. The mountains. Sakae.*

He — he said *you — you won't — won't make — make it. The — the road — road is — is out. Past — past Yamato. The — the bridge. You — you need — need to take — take the — the old — old mountain — mountain path.*

I — I said *I know. A — a farmer — farmer told — told us.*

He — he said *the — the mountain — mountain path — path is — is bad. The — the storms — storms have — have washed — washed parts — parts of — of it — it out. You — you need — need to — to be — be careful.*

I — I said *thank — thank you.*

He — he said *you — you should — should stay — stay here. Tonight. The — the station — station is — is closed, but — but I — I have — have a — a back — back room. You — you can — can sleep — sleep there.*

We — we looked — looked at — at each — each other. We — we did not — did not know — know if — if we — we should — should trust — trust him. We — we did not — did not know — know if — if he — he was — was — was safe. We — we did not — did not know.

But — but we — we were — were tired. We — we were — were so — so tired. We — we had — had been — been walking — walking for — for three — three days. We — we had — had not — had not slept — slept well — well in — in any — any of — of them. We — we were — were tired, and — and the — the man — man was — was — was kind. The — the man — man was — was the — the first — first kind — kind person — person we — we had — had met — met on — on the — the road.

We — we said — said yes.

We — we slept — slept in — in the — the back — back room. The — the back — back room — room was — was small, with — with a — a cot — cot and — and a — a chair. Akari — Akari took — took the — the cot. I — I took — took the — the floor. We — we slept. We — we slept for — for eight — eight hours. We — we did not — did not wake — wake up — up in — in the — the middle — middle of — of the — the night. We — we did not — did not take — take shifts. We — we just — just slept.

In — in the — the morning, the — the man — man had — had breakfast — breakfast ready. Rice. Miso. Fish. He — he had — had cooked — cooked it — it on — on a — a camp — camp stove, in — in the — the parking — parking lot. He — he gave — gave us — us — gave — gave us — us the — the breakfast. He — he did not — did not charge — charge us. He — he said *you — you need — need it — it more — more than — than I — I do*.

We — we ate. We — we thanked — thanked him. We — we left.

I — I have — have thought — thought about — about him — him too. I — I have — thought — thought about — about his — his kindness. I — I have — thought — thought about — about the — the breakfast. I — I have

— thought — thought about — about the — the back — back room, the — the cot, the — the chair. I — I have — thought — thought about — about the — the fact — fact that — that — that in — in the — the middle — middle of — of the — the apocalypse, in — in the — the middle — middle of — of the — the road, in — in the — the middle — middle of — of all — all of — of it, a — a man — man at — at a — a gas — gas station — station had — had been — been kind. Had — had been — been kind to — to two — two strangers. Had — had been — been kind for — for no — no reason. Had — had been — been kind because — because — because kindness — kindness was — was — was what — what he — he did. Was — was — was who — who he — he was.

I — I have — have thought — thought about — about that — that a — a lot.

The fifth person was — was a group. A — a group of — of people, on — on the — the fourth — fourth day, on — on the — the old — old mountain — mountain path. The — the group was — was five — five people. A — a family. A — a mother, a — a father, two — two children, a — a grandmother. They — they were — were going — going the — the same — same way — way we — we were — were going. They — they were — were going — going to — to the — the mountains.

We — we walked — walked with — with them — them for — for a — a day. We — we did not — did not talk — talk much. We — we walked. We — we helped — helped each — each other — other over — over the — the fallen — fallen logs. We — we shared — shared water — water when — when someone — someone ran — ran out. We — we shared — shared food — food when — when someone — someone ran — ran out. We — we

walked, and — and we — we did not — did not talk, and — and the — the walking — walking was — was — was better, for — for the — the having — having of — of — of them — them there.

In — in the — the evening, we — we camped — camped together. We — we built — built a — a fire. We — we ate — ate together. The — the mother — mother was — was the — the one — one who — who talked. She — she talked — talked about — about where — where they — they had — had come — come from. They — they had — had come — come from — from Nagaoka. They — they had — had lost — lost their — their house — house in — in the — the floods. They — they were — were going — going to — to the — the mountains — mountains because — because — because there — there was — was — was nowhere — nowhere else — else to — to go.

She — she asked — asked us. Where — where we — we were — were from. Where — where we — we were — were going. I — I told — told her. Niigata. Sakae. She — she nodded. She — she said *I — I have — have a — a cousin — cousin in — in Sakae. Or — or I — I did. I — I don't — don't know — know if — if she's — she's still — still there.*

I — I said *I — I hope — hope she — she is.*

She — she said *yeah. Me — Me too.*

We — we did not — did not talk — talk much — much after — after that. We — we slept. In — in the — the morning, we — we walked — walked on. They — they walked — walked slower — slower than — than us. The — the grandmother — grandmother was — was not — not — not fast. We — we walked — walked ahead. We — we did not — did not see —

see them — them again.

I — I have — have thought — thought about — about them — them too. I — I have — thought — thought about — about whether — whether they — they made — made it — made it to — to the — the mountains. I — I have — thought — thought about — about the — the cousin — cousin in — in Sakae. I — I have — thought — thought about — about the — the grandmother, the — the children, the — the mother, the — the father. I — I have — thought — thought about — about them.

I tell you — I tell you about — about the — the people — people on — on the — the road because — because the — the people — people are — are the — the thing — thing about — about the — the apocalypse — apocalypse that — that — that the — the movies — movies do — do not — not tell — tell you. The — the movies — movies tell — tell you — you about — about the — the disasters. The — the movies — movies tell — tell you — you about — about the — the moon, the — the floods, the — the earthquakes. The — the movies — movies do — do not — not tell — tell you — you about — about the — the people. The — the movies — movies do — do not — not tell — tell you — you about — about the — the woman — woman at — at the — the convenience — convenience store, crying — crying next — next to — to a — a full — full car. The — the movies — movies do — do not — not tell — tell you — you about — about the — the old — old man — man on — on the — the guardrail, with — with his — his head — head in — in his — his hands. The — the movies — movies do — do not — not tell — tell you — you about — about the — the five-year-old — five-year-old girl — girl in — in the — the middle — middle of — of the — the road, with — with the — the nothing — nothing eyes. The — the movies — movies do — do not — not tell — tell you — you about — about

the — the man — man at — at the — the gas — gas station, kind — kind for — for no — no reason. The — the movies — movies do — do not — not tell — tell you — you about — about the — the family — family on — on the — the mountain — mountain path, walking — walking the — the same — same way — way you — you are — are walking, sharing — sharing water — water, not — not talking — talking much.

The — the movies — movies do — do not — not tell — tell you — you that — that the — the apocalypse — apocalypse is — is — is mostly — mostly people.

The — the apocalypse — apocalypse is — is mostly — mostly people, and — and the — the people — people are — are — are mostly — mostly — mostly trying.

The — the people — people are — are mostly — mostly trying — trying to — to get — get somewhere, to — to keep — keep someone — someone safe, to — to figure — figure out — out what — what to — to leave — leave behind, to — to not — not give — give up. The — the people — people are — are — are mostly — mostly trying, the — the way — way we — we were — were trying. The — the way — way I — I was — was trying. The — the way — way Akari — Akari was — was trying.

The — the people — people are — are — are mostly — mostly trying.

And — and the — the ones — ones who — who are — are not — not trying — trying — the — the ones — ones who — who have — have given — given up, the — the ones — ones who — who are — are sitting — sitting on — on guardrails — guardrails with — with their — their heads — heads in — in their — their hands — hands — the — the ones — ones who — who

have — have the — the nothing — nothing eyes — those — those people — people are — are — are not — not the — the enemy. Those — those people — people are — are — are us. Those — those people — people are — are — are the — the us — us we — we could — could have — have been, if — if — if things — things had — had gone — gone differently. If — if — if we — we had — had not — not been — been stubborn. If — if — if we — we had — had not — not had — had each — each other — other. If — if — if — if.

I — I did not — did not stop — stop for — for the — the woman — woman at — at the — the convenience — convenience store. I — I did not — did not stop — stop for — for the — the old — old man — man on — on the — the guardrail. I — I did — did stop — stop for — for the — the girl — girl in — in the — the road, but — but I — I did — did not — not stay — stay with — with her. I — I did — did accept — accept the — the kindness — kindness of — of the — the man — man at — at the — the gas — gas station. I — I did — did walk — walk with — with the — the family — family on — on the — the mountain — mountain path.

I — I did what — what I — I could.

I — I did not — did not do — do enough.

I — I never — never do — do enough.

But — but I — I keep — keep going. I — I keep — keep trying. I — I keep — keep being — being stubborn. I — I keep — keep walking — walking the — the road, with — with Akari, with — with the — the people — people I — I can — can help, with — with the — the people — people who — who help — help me. I — I keep — keep walking. I — I keep — keep trying. I — I keep — keep being — being the — the person — person who — who keeps —

keeps going.

That — that is — is all — all I — I can — can do.

That — that is — is all — all any — any of — of us — us can — can do.

Keep — keep walking.

Keep — keep trying.

Keep — keep being — being stubborn.

Keep — keep loving — loving the — the person — person next — next to — to you.

Keep — keep going.

The — the moon — moon is — is — is still — still there.

But — but so — so are — are we.

Chapter 10 — The Month She Didn't Sleep

(Akari)

We reached Muikamachi on the fifth day.

It was not a clean walk. The roads got worse the further we got from the coast. The first two days were okay — Route 7 to Shibata, then Route 290 inland through the Agano valley, the road mostly empty, the few cars we saw going the other direction. We slept in bus shelters and a closed-down pachinko parlor and, on the third night, in a barn belonging to a farmer who took one look at us, said *you two look like hell*, and gave us his spare room. He did not ask our names. He did not ask where we were going. He fed us rice and miso and pickled vegetables, and he gave us a bottle of sake, and he waved us off in the morning with two extra onigiri and a piece of advice I did not expect.

"Don't take the main road past Yamato," he said. "The bridge is out. Take the old mountain path. It's longer but it's there."

We took the old mountain path.

The old mountain path was — I am being generous when I call it a path. It was a track. It was a suggestion of a track. It had not been maintained in, I would guess, twenty years. There were trees across it. There were streams running down it. There were sections where the track simply stopped existing and we had to guess, based on the contour of the land, where it had been.

Shirase navigated. She navigated by paper map and by memory and by stubbornness. She would stop at every junction, study the map, look at

the trees, look at the slope, and say *this way*, with a conviction that I did not share but that I had no alternatives to. I followed. We walked. We climbed. We scrambled over fallen logs. We crossed streams on rocks that were wet and slippery and that I would not have crossed in normal circumstances but that I crossed now because Shirase had crossed them first and she was standing on the other side holding out her hand.

She held out her hand.

I took it.

Her hand was smaller than mine. That should not have been possible — I was the smaller one, the more feminine one, the one with the painted nails — but her hands were small, the hands of a person who had stopped growing at sixteen and had not started again. Small and calloused at the fingertips from the warehouse work, and warm, very warm, despite the cold.

She held my hand. She helped me across the stream. She let go as soon as I was across.

I wanted her to not let go.

I did not say this.

We reached Muikamachi on the fifth day. Muikamachi is a small town in a mountain valley, maybe eight thousand people, elevation three hundred meters, on the banks of the Shinano River where it cuts through the mountains on its way to the sea. The town was full. Not impossibly full. Full the way a town gets when refugees from the coast start arriving — there were tents in the park, there were cars parked on every shoulder,

there were groups of people sitting outside the konbini with their suitcases, looking lost. But it was not gridlocked. It was not violent. It was, by the standards of the week, calm.

We found a ryokan on the east side of town. The ryokan was run by an old woman named Hayashi-san, who was seventy years old and who had no guests, because the trains had stopped running and the tourists had stopped coming. She looked at us — at our dirty clothes, at our packs, at the state of Shirase's hair, which had not been washed in five days — and she said *you two look like you need a bath*, and she gave us a room.

The room had a futon. Two futons, actually. A small one and a large one. She put them down side by side. She lit the kotatsu. She brought us towels. She brought us yukata. She said *bath's down the hall*, *water's hot*, *take your time*.

We bathed.

I will not describe the bath in detail. I will say only that it was the first hot water either of us had been in in five days, and that we both cried a little, quietly, when we got in, and that we did not talk about it, and that when we got out we both felt, for the first time since leaving Niigata, like people.

We ate dinner. Hayashi-san made it herself. Rice. Miso. Grilled fish. Pickles. Soup. Tea. She sat with us while we ate. She did not ask questions. She just sat, and she watched us eat, and she refilled our bowls when they got empty, and after a while she said *the moon's a strange thing, isn't it*, and Shirase said *yes, it is*, and Hayashi-san said *I've lived here fifty years and I've never seen it like this*, and Shirase said *none of us have*, and

Hayashi-san nodded and went to bed.

We slept in the futons. Side by side. The room was cold but the futons were warm. I lay on my back and I listened to Shirase breathe, and I thought about all the things I had not said to her in the past five days, and I thought about how I had held her hand for two seconds on a stream crossing and how I had not stopped thinking about it, and I thought about how the moon was overhead, huge and bright, throwing its light through the paper screens of the ryokan window, making the room silver.

I did not sleep.

I lay there for a long time.

Then I turned my head and I looked at Shirase. She was asleep. She was on her side, facing me, her hair spread out on the pillow, her face in the moonlight. She looked — she looked young. She always looked young. She would always look young. But in that moment, in that light, in that room, she looked young in a way that hurt.

I wanted to touch her face.

I did not touch her face.

I turned my head back. I looked at the ceiling. I waited for sleep.

Sleep did not come.

I got up, very quietly, and I went to the bathroom. I washed my face. I looked at myself in the mirror. The mirror was old and slightly warped and it made my face look strange. I looked at my strange face and I thought, *you have to tell her. You have to tell her before the moon takes her. You have*

to tell her before one of you dies. You have to tell her.

I did not tell her.

I went back to the futon. I lay down. I did not sleep.

In the morning, Shirase was already up. She was sitting at the window, looking at the valley. The moon was setting in the west, behind the mountains. The sun was rising in the east, behind the other mountains. The sky was wrong, but it was beautiful, in the way that wrong things can be beautiful.

"Akari," she said, without turning around.

"Yeah."

"I have a plan."

"You always have a plan."

"This one's a little different."

I sat up. I looked at the back of her head. Her hair was a mess. I wanted to brush it. I did not brush it.

"What's the plan?" I said.

"We stay here."

"Here."

"Muikamachi. Or somewhere like it. Mountain town. High ground. We find a place — a house, a barn, anything with a roof — and we hunker down. We wait it out."

"Wait it out."

"The moon's going to do what it's going to do. The government's going to do what it's going to do. We can't change any of that. What we can do is not die. We can find a place that's high enough to be safe from the floods, far enough from the cities to be safe from the unrest, and we can wait. We can wait for stabilization. Or rescue. Or the moon breaking apart. Whatever happens."

"And how long is that going to take?"

"I don't know. Months. Maybe longer."

"Months."

"Yeah."

I did not say anything for a while. I looked at the back of her head. I looked at the valley. I looked at the moon setting behind the mountains.

"Okay," I said. "Months. Let's do it."

She turned around. She looked at me. Her face did the stubborn-resignation thing.

"You sure?" she said.

"I'm sure. We've been walking for five days. I'm tired. We need a base. We need a place to — to exist. Let's find a place."

She nodded. "Okay. Today. We look today."

We looked today.

We found a place.

It was a small house on the edge of Muikamachi, up a dirt road, on a hill overlooking the valley. The house belonged to a man who had left for Tokyo two weeks ago, according to the neighbor, and who was not coming back, according to the same neighbor, because Tokyo was worse than Niigata. The neighbor did not own the house. The neighbor did not care who lived in it. The neighbor said *if you can get in, you can have it*, and walked away.

We got in. The door was unlocked. The house was small — two rooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, a wood stove — but it was standing, and it was dry, and it had a roof, and from the window you could see the entire valley, and the river, and the mountains, and the moon.

We moved in.

We did not have much to move. We had our packs. We had the supplies we had carried. We had the notebook. We had the clothes on our backs. We had each other.

It was enough. For the first day, it was enough.

The first week, it was enough.

The second week, it was enough.

The third week, Shirase stopped sleeping.

I did not notice at first. She had always been a bad sleeper. She had always stayed up too late. She had always run on four hours and barley tea. I had been watching her do this for a year and a half. I had stopped

noticing.

But in the third week, I noticed.

She was up when I went to sleep. She was up when I woke up. She was up in the middle of the night, when I got up to use the bathroom. She was up at dawn, when I got up to make tea. She was up at noon, when I made lunch. She was up at dusk, when I made dinner. She was up.

She was always up.

I started counting.

Day one: I assumed she had slept while I was asleep. I had not checked.

Day two: I got up at 2 AM. She was at the window, watching the valley. She did not turn around. I went back to bed.

Day three: I got up at 3 AM. She was at the window. She did not turn around.

Day four: I got up at 4 AM. She was at the window. She was not moving. She was just standing there. I said her name. She did not answer. I said it again. She turned around. Her eyes were — her eyes were not her eyes. They were the eyes I had seen on the bench, the night I met her. The eyes with the nothing behind them. The eyes that had decided to lie on a bench until something happened.

"Shirase," I said. "When did you last sleep?"

"I don't know."

"How long?"

"I don't know. A while."

"How long is a while, Shirase?"

"I don't — maybe — a week."

"A week."

"Maybe nine days."

"Shirase."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You're — look at your hands."

She looked at her hands. Her hands were shaking. Not the small tremble they got when she had been up for two days. A real shake. A shake that said *I have not slept in nine days and I am about to break.*

"Go to bed," I said.

"I can't."

"You can."

"I can't. If I sleep — if I sleep, who's going to — who's going to watch?"

"Watch what?"

"The valley. The road. The — anything. Anything could happen. Anything could come up the road. Cultists. Looters. The government. Anyone. If I'm asleep—"

"If you're asleep, I'm awake."

"You need to sleep too."

"I'll sleep when you sleep. Go to bed, Shirase."

"I can't."

"Shirase—"

"I can't. I've — I've done this before. I can do a month. I've done a month before. When I was—"

"When you were what?"

She did not answer. She turned back to the window.

"When I was on the bench," she said, very quietly. "The two weeks before you came. I didn't sleep. I didn't eat. I just — I was there. I can do it. I can do a month. I just need to—"

"Shirase Fukuoka."

She stopped. She turned around. She looked at me. The nothing in her eyes was — the nothing in her eyes was at war with something. With stubbornness. With the part of her that had decided, somewhere in the back of her head, that she was going to keep me alive by sheer force of not sleeping.

"You're going to kill yourself," I said.

"Better me than you."

"That's not — that's not how this works. That's not — Shirase, you can't

do a month. You did two weeks before and you almost died. You ended up on a park bench with dead eyes—"

"I'm not on a park bench."

"You're at a window. It's the same thing."

"It's not—"

"It is. It's the same thing. You've decided to die for me and you've dressed it up as stubbornness and I'm not letting you. I'm not letting you do this. Go to bed. Go to bed right now or I swear to god I will drag you."

She looked at me. Her mouth did the complicated thing.

"Akari—"

"Now."

She went. She lay down on the futon. She closed her eyes. She did not sleep. She lay there for an hour, eyes closed, breathing evenly, not sleeping. I sat next to her and I watched her not sleep and I wanted to scream.

She did not sleep that night. She did not sleep the next night. She did not sleep the night after that.

I started counting again. From the day I had noticed. Day one. Day two. Day three. Day four. Day five. Day six. Day seven.

Day eight. Day nine. Day ten.

By day ten she was seeing things. She would look at the corner of the room and she would flinch. She would say *did you see that*, and I would

say *see what*, and she would say *nothing, never mind*. She would talk to herself in low murmurs, not the kind of talking-to-yourself she normally did, the kind where she was thinking out loud. This was different. This was talking to people who were not there.

By day twelve she was stumbling. She would walk into doorframes. She would drop things. She would start a sentence and not finish it. She would stand in the kitchen and not know why she was in the kitchen.

By day fourteen she was not eating.

I made her eat. I sat her down at the table. I put rice in front of her. I put miso in front of her. I put a piece of fish in front of her. I stood over her and I said *eat*, and she ate, mechanically, the way she had eaten the melon pan on the bench the night I met her. She did not taste it. She did not chew properly. She just — processed it.

By day sixteen she was not talking.

She would sit at the window. She would not turn around. I would say her name and she would not answer. I would say it again and she would not answer. I would say it a third time, louder, and she would turn around with the nothing-eyes and she would say *what*, in a voice that was not her voice.

By day eighteen she fell down.

She just — fell. She was at the window. She turned around to come to the kitchen for dinner. She took two steps. Her legs gave out. She went down, hard, on the wood floor, and she did not put her hands out to catch herself, because her body had forgotten how to catch itself.

She did not get up.

I screamed her name. I ran to her. I rolled her over. Her eyes were open. The nothing-eyes were — the nothing-eyes were there, but there was something behind them now, and the something was confusion. She did not know where she was. She did not know who I was. She looked at me and she said *who*, in a voice so small I almost did not hear it.

"It's me," I said. "It's Akari. It's Akari, Shirase, it's me."

She did not say anything. She blinked. She blinked again. Something came back into her eyes. Not all of it. Some of it.

"Akari," she said.

"Yes. Yes. I'm here. I'm right here. Don't move. Don't—"

"I can't—"

"Don't move. I'm going to pick you up. I'm going to—"

"I can't—"

"Shut up. Shut up and let me."

I picked her up. She weighed nothing. She was — she was taller than me, but she weighed nothing, because she had not been eating, not really, and the not-sleeping had burned through whatever she had left. I picked her up and I carried her to the futon — I carried her, the way she had not let me carry her for a year and a half, the way I had wanted to carry her for a year and a half — and I put her down on the futon and I covered her with the blanket and I knelt next to her and I held her hand and I cried.

I cried the way I had cried in the park, the day she left the note. Ugly. Loud. The kind of crying that comes from a place deeper than the chest.

She did not see me cry. She had fallen asleep. Finally. Eighteen days. She had fallen asleep, the way a person falls when they have been standing too long — all at once, completely, like the string holding her up had been cut.

She slept for fourteen hours.

When she woke up, she could not move.

She tried to sit up. She could not. Her arms would not hold her. Her legs would not move. She looked at me — the nothing-eyes were gone, replaced by something worse, which was fear — and she said, very quietly, "Akari, I can't move."

"I know."

"How long—"

"Eighteen days. You didn't sleep for eighteen days. I'm — I should have — I should have made you—"

"I'm sorry."

"Don't you dare apologize. Don't you dare. This is — this is on both of us. This is on you for being stubborn and this is on me for letting you. We're both idiots. Don't apologize."

"I'm—"

"If you say *I'm sorry* one more time I'm going to slap you."

She did not say it.

I made her tea. I made her rice. I made her miso. I fed her, the way you feed a baby — small bites, small sips, slow. She ate. She did not protest. She did not argue. She just — received.

I had become the caretaker.

I had always been the caretaker, I think. I had been the caretaker since the park bench. I had just not noticed.

I noticed now.

She could not move for three days. She could not stand without help. She could not walk to the bathroom without me holding her up. She could not hold a cup without spilling it. Her body — her stupid, stubborn, twenty-two-year-old body that looked sixteen — had given out, the way she had told me it would, the way I should have remembered.

Can stay awake for an entire month without sleeping but would have an immense drawback of being weakened for an entire week.

A week.

She had told me. Months ago. The first month I knew her. Offhand. Like it was a fun fact. Like it was a party trick. *I can stay awake for a month if I need to. The drawback is I'm basically dead for a week after.*

I should have remembered.

I should have made her sleep.

I did not.

I was not going to make that mistake again.

For the next week, I did not leave her side. I made her food. I helped her to the bathroom. I washed her, with a cloth and warm water, the way you wash someone who cannot wash themselves. I brushed her hair. I changed her clothes. I held the cup for her when she could not hold it herself. I sat next to her on the futon and I read to her, because she could not hold a book, and I read her *Bloom Into You*, from the start, because it was the book that had brought us together and I wanted her to hear it.

She listened. She did not say anything. She just — listened.

On the fourth day she said, very quietly, "Akari."

"Yeah."

"You don't have to—"

"Shut up."

"I—"

"Shut up and let me take care of you. Just once. Just this once. Let me take care of you. Stop being stubborn for one week. Stop being the person who has to do everything herself. Stop. Just — let me."

She did not say anything for a long moment.

Then she said, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay. Yeah. I'll — I'll let you."

I started crying again. I had not meant to. It just happened. I cried for about ten seconds, hard, and then I stopped, because I had things to do, and Shirase was looking at me with an expression I had never seen on her face before, an expression I did not have a word for, an expression that was the opposite of the nothing-eyes and that I wanted to keep looking at forever.

"Akari," she said.

"What."

"Thank you."

I did not say *you're welcome*. I said *shut up*, and I picked up the book, and I kept reading.

She closed her eyes. She did not sleep. She just listened.

The moon, outside the window, kept falling.

I kept reading.

It was, I think, the most important week of my life.

Chapter 11 — Care and Feeding of a Stubborn Idiot

(Akari)

The week was — I do not know how to describe the week.

I have read a lot of yuri manga. I have read the kind where the girls take care of each other, where one of them gets sick and the other stays by her bedside for days, where they hold hands and read books and fall deeper in love through the act of care. I have read these scenes a hundred times. I have cried at them. I have bookmarked them. I have, in the privacy of my bedroom at 2 AM, imagined what it would be like to be in one of those scenes with Shirase.

It was not like the manga.

It was harder.

It was harder because Shirase was real. She was not a drawing. She was not a character. She was a twenty-two-year-old woman who had not slept for eighteen days and who could not lift her own cup, and the vulnerability of her — the actual, physical, *real* vulnerability of her — was not romantic. It was terrifying. It was the most terrifying thing I had ever experienced, more terrifying than the earthquake, more terrifying than the moon, more terrifying than the crowds on the road.

I had to take care of her. Not because I wanted to. Because she would die if I did not.

I am not being dramatic. I mean it. She would have died. She was — by

day five of her weakened state, she was running a fever. Not a high one. A low one. The kind of low fever that says *I am exhausted and my body is trying to fix itself and I do not have the resources.* I took her temperature every four hours. I wrote it down. I watched it. I knew, from the disaster prep research I had been doing for weeks, that a fever in a weakened person was a dangerous thing, that the line between *tired* and *dying* was thinner than anyone wanted to admit.

I did not sleep much either.

I did not sleep much because every time I closed my eyes I saw her face on the floor, the day she fell, the nothing-eyes looking up at me and saying *who,* and the *who* echoed in my head every time I tried to sleep, and I would sit up and check that she was breathing, and she was breathing, and I would lie down, and I would close my eyes, and the *who* would come back.

Day one.

I made rice. I made miso. I made broth, the way my grandmother had taught me, with kombu and bonito and a little soy. I fed her in small amounts, every two hours, because her stomach had shrunk and could not take much at once. I held the cup for her. I wiped her mouth when she spilled. I did not let her apologize.

She slept a lot. That was good. Her body needed it. I let her sleep. I sat next to her and I read, and when I was not reading I was cleaning, and when I was not cleaning I was inventorying our supplies, and when I was not inventorying I was at the window watching the valley, because someone had to watch the valley and she could not.

I watched the valley.

Nothing came up the road. Not that day. Not the next. The road was empty. The valley was empty. The town, far below, was a cluster of roofs and a faint sound of voices, and beyond the town the river, and beyond the river the mountains, and beyond the mountains the moon, huge and silver, setting in the west.

Day two.

She could sit up. Not for long. Five minutes at a time. Then she would lie back down, exhausted, like sitting up was a marathon. I helped her sit. I helped her lie back. I brushed her hair, because I had wanted to brush her hair for a year and a half, and now I could, and the brushing was not romantic, the brushing was medical, the brushing was because her hair was matted and she could not brush it herself.

Her hair was — I had not known. I had not known how soft it was. I had not known how it felt in my hands. I had not known the weight of it, the way it pulled against my fingers, the way it caught the light. I had been looking at her hair for a year and a half and I had not known any of this.

I brushed it for an hour.

She did not say anything. She just lay there, with her eyes closed, and let me brush.

Day three.

She could stand, with help. I helped her to the bathroom. I helped her back. She did not look at me. She was embarrassed. I could tell. I did not

say anything. I just helped.

When we were back on the futon she said, very quietly, "Akari."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry."

"You said that already."

"I know. I'm saying it again. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have — I shouldn't have done the month thing. I told you I could do a month. I told you the drawback was a week. I knew. I just — I thought I could handle it. I thought if I could just stay up long enough, just keep watch long enough, nothing would—"

"Shut up."

"Akari—"

"Shut up. I'm serious. Shut up. You're not allowed to apologize for this. You did a stupid thing. I let you do a stupid thing. We're both stupid. We're even. Shut up."

She did not say anything.

I picked up the book. I kept reading.

I was on volume four of *Bloom Into You*. The scene where Touko collapses in the gym. The scene where Yuu stays with her. The scene where Yuu, who has been pretending she does not love Touko, finally admits to herself that she does.

I read it out loud.

Shirase was very still.

I read the next page. The next. I read the part where Yuu says *I think I'm in love with you*, and the words came out of my mouth in the small quiet room with the moon through the window, and I read them without looking at Shirase, and I could feel her listening.

I closed the book.

I did not look at her.

"Akari," she said.

"Don't."

"I—"

"Don't. Not — not like this. Not when you can't — not when you're — not now. Not now. Save it. Save it for when you can stand up. Save it for when you can look at me. I'm not having this conversation with you on your back."

She did not say anything.

I did not look at her.

I opened the book. I kept reading.

Day four.

She could walk to the bathroom by herself. She could not walk back. I met her halfway. She leaned on me. I helped her to the futon. She did not let go of me. She held on. Her hand was — her hand was on my arm, and her hand was shaking, and I could feel her pulse through her fingers, and

her pulse was fast and irregular, the pulse of a body that was trying to remember how to be a body.

"Akari," she said.

"Yeah."

"I—"

"Don't."

"I was just going to say thank you."

"Oh."

"You thought I was going to—"

"I told you. Not now. Save it."

She let go of my arm. She lay back. She closed her eyes. I sat next to her and I watched her breathe and I thought, *I am going to have this conversation. I am going to have this conversation with her. The conversation I have been terrified of for a year and a half. I am going to have it. When she is well. When we are both well. When the moon is not — when the moon is not — I am going to have it.*

I did not know when that would be.

I knew only that it would be.

Day five.

The fever broke. I knew because I took her temperature at 4 AM, the way I had been taking it every four hours, and it was normal, and I sat

down on the floor next to the futon and I cried, silently, with my hand over my mouth, because I had not realized how scared I had been until the scared was over.

She slept through my crying. That was good. She needed the sleep.

When she woke up she was — different. Not well. Not yet. But different. The nothing was gone from her eyes. There was something behind them now. There was *her*.

She looked at me. She looked at me for a long time.

"Akari."

"Yeah."

"You've been crying."

"No I haven't."

"Your eyes are red."

"Allergies."

"You don't have allergies."

"I have allergies now. The apocalypse gave me allergies. Shut up and drink your tea."

She laughed. A small laugh. The first laugh she had laughed in two weeks. The sound of it went through me like a current.

"Akari," she said.

"What."

"I'm going to get better."

"I know you are."

"And when I get better, we're going to talk."

"I know."

"About — about everything. About — about us. About — I'm going to —"

"I know. I told you. Save it. Save it for when you can stand up."

"I can stand up now."

"You can stand up for thirty seconds and then you fall over. Save it for when you can stand up for thirty minutes. Save it for when you can walk to the bathroom without me holding your arm. Save it for — I don't know. Save it for when the moon stops falling. Just — save it. Please."

She looked at me. Her mouth did the complicated thing. Then she said, "Okay. I'll save it."

"Good."

"I love you."

I froze.

She had said it. She had said it like she was saying *the sky is blue* or *I haven't eaten since Monday.* Just — flat. Just — there. Just — said.

"You — what?"

"I love you. I've loved you since — since the bench. Since the melon

pan. Since — I don't know. Since the first time you came back. I love you. I'm sorry. I know you said save it. I know. I just — I almost died. I almost died because I was too stubborn to sleep, and the reason I was too stubborn to sleep was because I couldn't — I couldn't let anything happen to you. I couldn't. And if I'm going to die for that, then I'm — I'm going to say it. At least once. I love you. I'm sorry. I'll shut up now. I'll—"

I kissed her.

I do not know how it happened. I do not remember deciding to do it. I just — I was sitting next to her, and she was saying *I love you*, and my body moved, and I kissed her.

It was — it was not a good kiss. It was awkward. Her lips were dry from the fever. My lips were dry from the cold. Our noses bumped. She made a small sound, surprise, and then she kissed me back, and the kiss was — the kiss was the most important thing that had ever happened to me.

It lasted about four seconds.

Then I pulled back.

We looked at each other.

"Don't — don't do that again," I said. My voice was very strange. "Not — not until you're well. Not until — I want — I want to do this right. I want — I've wanted this for a year and a half and I want to do it right. I don't want our first real kiss to be in a sickroom. I want — I want it to be — I want to be standing. I want you to be standing. I want — I don't know what I want. Just — not now. Not yet. Please."

She looked at me.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay?"

"Okay. Not yet. When I'm well."

"When you're well."

"I love you."

"I know. I — I love you too. I've loved you for — I don't even know how long. Since — since volume four. Since you read *Bloom Into You* on a park bench in the rain. Since — I don't know. Since forever. I love you too. I just — not now. Not yet. Wait for me. Please."

"I'll wait," she said. "I've been waiting. I can keep waiting."

I started crying again. I had not meant to. I just — I cried. And she reached up — slowly, weakly, her arm trembling — and she touched my face, and her fingers were cold, and her touch was the lightest thing I had ever felt, and I closed my eyes and I let her touch me and I cried.

"I'm going to get well," she said. "I'm going to get well and then I'm going to kiss you properly and then we're going to figure out how to live through this. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay."

She let her hand fall. She closed her eyes. She was asleep in about thirty seconds. I sat next to her and I watched her sleep and I cried for a

long time and then I stopped crying and I went to the kitchen and I made her tea and I made her rice and I waited for her to wake up.

The moon, outside the window, kept falling.

But I had kissed her.

I had kissed her, and she had kissed me back, and she had said *I love you*, and I had said *I love you too*, and we were going to figure out how to live through this.

We were going to figure it out.

We were stubborn.

We were going to figure it out.

Interlude II — The Long Week

(Akari)

I want to tell you about the week.

Not the week of the fever. Not the week of the broth and the *Bloom Into You* and the kissing on the futon. The week after. The week that Shirase does not remember, because she was asleep for most of it, and that I remember because I was awake for all of it.

The week after she collapsed.

She collapsed on day eighteen of the not-sleeping. I have told you this. She collapsed, and I picked her up, and I put her on the futon, and I cried, and she slept for fourteen hours. Then she woke up. Then she could not move. Then I spent a week taking care of her. I have told you this.

I have not told you what it was like.

It was — it was the hardest week of my life. Harder than the earthquake. Harder than the road. Harder than the cult. Harder than the flood. Harder than any of it. It was the hardest week because it was — it was the week where I could not — I could not be stubborn. I could not — I could not refuse to die. I could not — I could not fight. I could not — I could not do any of the things I was good at. All I could do was — was be there. Was — was feed her. Was — was wipe her face. Was — was hold the cup. Was — was sit next to her and read and hope that the reading was — was helping, that the sound of my voice was — was helping, that — that anything was helping.

It was the week where I learned that being there is — is harder than fighting. Being there is — is harder than running. Being there is — is the hardest thing. Being there is — is the thing that does not — does not feel like anything. Being there is — is just — is just being there. Day after day. Hour after hour. Cup after cup. Nothing — nothing happens. Nothing — nothing changes. You just — you just keep being there. And you hope.

You hope.

You hope that the being there is — is doing something. You hope that the broth is — is helping. You hope that the reading is — is helping. You hope that the — that the hand on her forehead, the hand checking for fever, is — is helping. You hope. You hope. You hope.

You do not know.

You do not know if it is helping. You do not know if she is going to get better. You do not know if — if the fever is going to break. You do not know if — if her body is going to remember how to be a body. You do not know. You just — you just keep being there. And you hope.

That was the week.

Day one. Day two. Day three. Day four. Day five. Day six. Day seven. Each day the same. Each day — each day I got up. I made tea. I made rice. I made broth. I fed her. I held the cup. I wiped her face. I brushed her hair. I helped her to the bathroom. I helped her back. I sat next to her. I read to her. I read *Bloom Into You* and then I read it again and then I read it a third time, because I had run out of other books and because the words were — were the right words, were the words I wanted her to hear, were the words about a girl who loved a girl and did not know how to say it and

said it anyway.

I read the same words over and over.

I did not know if she heard them.

I hoped she heard them.

Day four was the worst.

Day four was the worst because on day four I thought she was going to die.

I did not tell her this. I did not tell anyone this. I am telling you now, five years later, on a page that she will probably never read, because — because I want someone to know. I want — I want there to be a record. I want — I want it to be — to be real, somewhere, in someone's head, that on day four I thought she was going to die.

She had a fever. I have told you this. A low fever. The kind that says *I am exhausted.* On day four the fever spiked. It went — it went up. It went — it went to thirty-nine. It went — it went to forty. It went — I do not remember the exact number. I remember the thermometer. I remember the — the little beep, the little flash of the number, the — the way my stomach dropped when I saw the number. I remember writing it down in the notebook, the way I had been writing down every number, every four hours, and then — and then sitting there on the floor next to the futon and looking at the number I had written and thinking — thinking *this is it. This is how it happens. This is how I lose her.*

I did not — I did not scream. I did not cry. I — I sat there. I sat there for — I do not know how long. A minute. Five minutes. I sat there and I

looked at the number and I thought — I thought about all the things I had not said. I thought about — about the bench. About the melon pan. About the year of Tuesdays. About the spring. About the park. About — about all of it. I thought about — about how I had spent a year and a half not saying the thing, and now — now she was going to die, and I was never going to say it, and she was never going to know, and — and that was going to be — that was going to be the shape of my life. A life where I had not said the thing.

I thought — I thought about killing myself.

I am — I am telling you this because — because I want to be honest. Because — because the yuri manga does not tell you this part. The yuri manga tells you about the — the soft parts. The — the kissing parts. The — the love parts. The yuri manga does not tell you about the part where you sit on the floor of a house in the mountains and think about killing yourself because the person you love is dying and you cannot — you cannot do anything about it.

I thought about it.

I thought about it for — for a while. I do not know how long. I thought about — I thought about how I would do it. I thought about — I thought about the knife. The little pink folding knife. I thought about — I thought about the river. The river down the hill. I thought about — I thought about walking out of the house and just — just walking. Just walking until I found a place to — to stop.

I thought about it.

And then I — I did not.

I did not because — because of Shirase. Because of — because of what she would have said. Because of — because if she had been awake, if she had been — been herself, she would have said — she would have said *don't*. She would have said — she would have said *you don't get to do that. You don't get to — to give up. You're — you're the stubbornest person I've ever met. You don't get to give up. You — you stay. You stay here. You — you be here. You — you be the person who comes back.*

She would have said that.

She would have said that because she had said it to me, a hundred times, in a hundred small ways, in the year and a half before. She had said it by being there. She had said it by — by not giving up on me. By — by sitting on the park bench. By — by eating the melon pan. By — by getting up the next morning. By — by being stubborn.

She had taught me to be stubborn.

I was — I was going to be stubborn.

I was going to be stubborn for her, the way she had been stubborn for me. I was going to — I was going to sit on the floor of this house. I was going to — I was going to feed her. I was going to — I was going to wipe her face. I was going to — I was going to read to her. I was going to — I was going to be there. I was going to — I was going to be there for as long as it took. I was going to — I was going to be there even if — even if she did not get better. I was going to — I was going to be there. I was going to — I was going to be the person who came back. I was going to — I was going to — I was going to be stubborn.

That was — that was the moment. That was — that was when I —

when I decided. Not — not the decision to love her. I had decided that — I had decided that on the bench. Not the decision to take care of her. I had decided that — I had decided that when I picked her up off the floor. The — the decision to — to live. To — to keep living. To — to not give up. To — to be stubborn.

I decided to be stubborn.

And then I got up off the floor.

I got up off the floor and I went to the kitchen and I made more broth. I made more tea. I made — I made another batch of rice. I — I went back to the futon. I — I sat down next to her. I — I put my hand on her forehead. The fever was — the fever was still there. The fever was — the fever was bad. But — but I had decided to be stubborn, and stubborn meant — stubborn meant I was going to — I was going to keep going. I was going to — I was going to keep being there. I was — I was going to — I was going to hope.

So I hoped.

I hoped for — for the rest of day four. I hoped through day five. I hoped — I hoped, and I made broth, and I held the cup, and I read *Bloom Into You*, and I wrote down the temperature every four hours, and I — I hoped.

And on day five, the fever broke.

I have told you this. I told you — I told you I cried. I told you — I told you I sat on the floor and I cried, silently, with my hand over my mouth. I told you that.

I did not tell you why.

I cried because — because the hope had worked. I cried because — because I had decided to be stubborn, and stubborn had — had won. I cried because — because Shirase was going to live. I cried because — because I was not going to lose her. I cried because — because the universe had — had given me this. Had — had let me keep her. Had — had not — had not taken her.

I cried because — because I had been so scared. So — so scared. For — for five days. For — for the whole week. For — for the whole month before. For — for the whole year and a half before. For — for the whole time I had known her. I had been — I had been scared. Scared of losing her. Scared of — of not being enough. Scared of — of the universe taking her. Scared of — of all of it. I had been scared, and I had not — I had not said it, and I had not — I had not shown it, and I had been — I had been scared, and — and now the fear was — was over. For — for a moment. For — for that one moment, when the thermometer beeped and the number was normal, the fear was over. And the — and the relief was — was so big that I could not — I could not hold it. I could not — I could not contain it. I had to — I had to cry. I had to — I had to let it out.

So I cried.

And then I stopped crying. And then I brushed her hair. And then I read her *Bloom Into You* for the fourth time. And then I waited for her to wake up.

She woke up.

She got better.

We had the conversation. The — the kissing conversation. The — the I-love-you conversation. The — the conversation I had been waiting a year and a half to have. I have told you about it. I have told you — I have told you everything. I have told you about the kiss, and the — and the *not yet*, and the — and the *tomorrow*.

I have not told you about the week.

I am telling you about the week now because — because the week was — was the thing. The week was — was the test. The week was — was the moment where I found out — found out if I was — if I was the person I thought I was. If I was — if I was the person who came back. If I was — if I was the person who could be — be there. For — for as long as it took. For — for however long. For — for the whole thing.

I was.

I am.

I am — I am that person. I am — I am the person who came back. I am — I am the person who was there. I am — I am the person who sat on the floor and hoped. I am — I am the person who was stubborn. I am — I am that person. I — I did not know, before the week. I — I hoped I was. I — I tried to be. But — but I did not know. Not — not for sure. Not — not until the week.

The week taught me.

The week taught me that — that I was — that I was the person I wanted to be. That — that I could be — be there. That — that I could be — be stubborn. That — that I could — could love her, in the — in the hardest

way, in the — in the way that does not — does not feel like anything, in the — in the way that is just — just being there, day after day, hour after hour, cup after cup, and — and not — not give up.

I learned that.

I learned it from her. I learned it from — from the year of Tuesdays. I learned it from — from the bench. I learned it from — from the melon pan. I learned it from — from the way she had been — been stubborn, for — for her whole life, for — for twenty-two years, for — for all of it. I learned it from — from her.

And then — and then I gave it back. In — in the week. In — in the broth. In — in the reading. In — in the being there. I — I gave it back. I — I gave her — her own stubbornness. I — I gave it back to her. In — in the form of me.

That was — that was the week.

That was — that was the thing the week was for.

I think about the week a lot. I think about it — I think about it now, five years later, on the porch of the Tanaka house, with the moon in the sky and Shirase at the desk inside, playing *Ruinverse II*. I think about it because — because the week was — was when I — when I became the person I am now. The — the person who is — is here. The — the person who is — is with her. The — the person who is — is going to be — be with her, for — for as long as the moon, for — for longer than the moon, for — for as long as we are — are stubborn.

Which is — which is going to be a long time.

I think about the week, and I am — I am grateful. I am — I am grateful for the week. I am — I am grateful for the — the fear, and the — the hope, and the — the crying, and the — the being there. I am — I am grateful for all of it. Because — because the week made me — made me the person who could — could love her. Properly. The — the way she — the way she deserves to be loved. The — the way I — I want to love her.

The week made me that person.

And — and I am — I am that person now.

And — and I am — I am going to be that person for — for as long as — for as long as she will have me.

Which is — which is going to be a long time.

Because she is stubborn.

And so am I.

Chapter 12 — Cult of the Falling Moon

(Shirase)

I got well. It took another week. A week of broth and rice and Akari reading to me from volumes five and six and seven of *Bloom Into You* and refusing to kiss me again, no matter how many times I asked, no matter how many times I said *I'm well enough, I promise, please.* She was firm. She was stubborn. She was, in this one specific area, more stubborn than I was, which I had not previously believed was possible.

"You're still walking into doorframes," she said, on day three of my recovery, when I tried to argue.

"That's just how I walk."

"You're walking into doorframes *more* than you usually do. No. Wait."

"Akari—"

"Wait."

I waited. I hated waiting. I am bad at waiting. I am, in fact, worse at waiting than I am at sleeping, which is saying something, because I am very bad at sleeping. But I waited, because she had asked me to wait, and because she had kissed me, and because the look on her face when she kissed me was a look I wanted to see again, and the only way to see it again was to do what she said.

I waited.

On the seventh day of my recovery — twenty-five days after I had

stopped sleeping, twelve days after I had collapsed, twelve days since Akari had kissed me on the futon and refused to kiss me again — I stood up. I walked to the kitchen. I made tea. I did not walk into a single doorframe. I brought the tea back to the futon. I sat down next to Akari. I handed her the cup.

She took the cup. She looked at me. She looked at me for a long time.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay what?"

"Okay, you're well."

"I've been telling you that for—"

"I know. I didn't believe you. Now I believe you."

"Good. So—"

"Soon."

"Soon?"

"Soon. Not today. Not — I want — I want it to be — I want it to be right. I want it to be — not in the middle of the apocalypse. Not — I don't know. Soon. I promise. Soon."

I looked at her. She looked at me. We were very close. We had been close for days, because I had been sick and she had been nursing me and proximity was a medical necessity, but now I was well and the proximity was no longer medical and we both knew it and neither of us moved.

"Soon," I said.

"Soon."

"Okay."

"Okay."

We did not kiss. We sat there. The moment stretched. The moment was — the moment was the most romantic non-kiss of my life. It was the kind of moment that in a light novel would have been interrupted by a phone call or a sudden explosion or a notification chime, and I was waiting for the interruption, and the interruption did not come, and we sat there for what felt like an hour, and then Akari stood up — suddenly, like she was afraid of what would happen if she stayed — and she went to the kitchen and she started washing the cup I had given her, and the water ran for a long time, and I sat on the futon and looked at the ceiling and thought about how I was in love with her and she was in love with me and we had agreed to kiss *soon* and the moon was still falling.

The moon was still falling.

I had not forgotten.

The moon was still falling, and we were in a small house on a hill above a small town in the mountains, and the world outside was — the world outside was not okay. I had been too sick to pay attention for two weeks. Akari had been too busy paying attention to me. We had not been watching the valley. We had not been listening to the radio. We had been — we had been in our own small world, the world of *Bloom Into You* and broth and fever, and the larger world had continued without us.

I got up. I went to the radio. I turned it on.

The radio was — the radio was bad.

The tsunami warnings had expanded. The entire Japan Sea coast was under evacuation. Tokyo was — Tokyo was not okay. There had been riots. There had been fires. There had been — there had been a thing the radio called *mass casualties* in Osaka, which is the kind of phrase the radio uses when it does not want to say *a lot of people died*. The government had moved to Nagoya. The Emperor had made a speech. The Prime Minister had not been seen in three days.

The moon was at sixty percent of its original distance.

Sixty percent.

I did the math. The math was not good. The moon's apparent diameter in the sky was — I am not going to do the math here. I am just going to tell you that the moon was huge. The moon was so huge that when I went outside, that night, and looked up at it, the moon filled a quarter of the sky. The craters on it were — I could see individual craters. I could see the rays of Tycho. I could see the terminator, the line between the light side and the dark side, sharp and definite as a knife edge. The moon was — the moon was no longer a distant thing. The moon was right there. The moon was so close I felt like I could reach out and touch it.

I could not reach out and touch it. It was still thirty-eight thousand kilometers away. But it *felt* like I could.

I went back inside.

"Akari."

"I heard." She was at the kitchen counter. She had been listening. She

had her back to me. Her shoulders were very straight. "Sixty percent."

"Yeah."

"How long do we have?"

"To what?"

"To — I don't know. To anything. To the Roche limit. To the moon breaking apart. To—"

"I don't know. The acceleration has been — it's been — I don't know. Two months? Three? Maybe less."

"Months."

"Yeah."

She did not say anything. She stood at the counter with her back to me. I wanted to go to her. I wanted to put my arms around her. I did not. We had agreed to wait. We were waiting. Waiting was harder than I had thought.

"Okay," she said, finally. "Okay. We have — we have months. We have — we keep going. We do what we planned. We survive. We—"

She stopped. I heard it too.

Footsteps. On the road below the house. A lot of footsteps.

I went to the window. Akari came to stand next to me. We looked out.

There were people on the road.

Not refugees. Not — not the kind of people we had seen on the road

from Niigata, the people with suitcases and children and lost looks. These were different. These were — organized. They were walking in a column. They were all wearing the same thing — white robes, simple, the kind of thing you see in paintings of pilgrims — and they were singing. Or chanting. I could not tell which. The sound of it came up the hill, low and steady, and it was not a sound I liked.

"What is that?" Akari said.

"I don't know."

"Shirase—"

"I don't know."

The column reached the bottom of the hill. They turned. They started up the dirt road toward the house.

Toward our house.

I looked at Akari. Akari looked at me. We did not need to talk. We both moved at the same time. I went for the knife — the little pink folding knife Akari had bought, the one she had practiced with — and the go-bag. Akari went for the supplies. We had drilled this. We had not drilled this enough, but we had drilled it. Three minutes. We could be out the back door and into the woods in three minutes.

We were not going to have three minutes.

The first knock came before I had the knife in my hand.

It was a polite knock. Three knocks. Patient. The kind of knock a neighbor gives.

I looked at Akari. She looked at me. I put the knife behind my back. I went to the door.

"Who is it?" I said.

A voice. A man's voice. Soft. Cultivated. The kind of voice that had been trained, somewhere, to sound trustworthy. "Hello. We are travelers. We have come from the south. We saw your light. We were hoping to share a meal and a word, if you would permit us."

I did not want to permit them.

I also did not see how I could refuse without making things worse.

"One moment," I said.

I went back to Akari. "Cultists," I said, very quietly. "Or pilgrims. Or something. They want to come in."

"No."

"I know. But there's a lot of them. If we say no, they — I don't know what they do. If we say yes, we — I don't know what they do. I think we say yes. I think we let them in. I think we feed them. I think we listen to whatever they have to say. I think we are very, very polite. And then I think they leave."

"And if they don't leave?"

I held up the knife.

"We leave," I said.

She looked at the knife. She looked at me. She nodded.

"Okay," she said. "Let them in. I'll make tea."

I went back to the door. I opened it.

The man on the step was — I am going to describe him, because I want you to see what I saw. He was maybe forty. Tall. Thin. Handsome, in the way that men who have been told they are handsome are handsome. He was wearing the white robe. His hair was long, pulled back. His eyes were very blue and very calm and they looked at me with a kind of attention I did not like.

"Good evening," he said. "My name is Tendo. I am the elder brother of the Children of the Perigee. We have been walking for many days. We saw your light. We were hoping—"

"Come in," I said. "We'll make tea."

He smiled. The smile did not reach his eyes. "Thank you," he said. "May we bring a few of our number? We have been walking all day, and there are some among us who are very tired."

"How many?"

"Only four. Plus myself. Five in total. The rest will camp in the field below."

Five. Five I could handle. Five I could watch. Five I could — five I could stab, if it came to that, although I did not think it would. I hoped it would not.

"Five," I said. "Come in."

He turned. He made a gesture. Four more came up the path. Two men,

two women. All in white robes. All with the same calm, blue-eyed look. All smiling the smile that did not reach their eyes.

They came in.

Akari had tea ready. She had also, I noticed, positioned herself by the kitchen counter, near the larger knife — the one we used for cutting fish, which was very sharp and very large. She was being a hostess. She was also being a guard. She was doing both at the same time, which was the most Akari thing I had ever seen her do.

We sat. We drank tea. We made small talk. Tendo did most of the talking. He was — he was good at it. He was the kind of talker who made you feel like the conversation was a gift he was giving you. He talked about the road. He talked about the weather. He talked about the moon.

"The moon," he said, looking out the window at the huge silver thing in the sky, "is a teacher."

I did not say anything. Akari did not say anything.

"The moon is teaching us," he said, "that the things we thought were permanent are not permanent. The things we thought were distant are not distant. The things we thought were outside us are inside us. The moon is coming home. The moon is returning to the Earth, which gave birth to it. The moon is — the moon is a reunification. The moon is a healing."

I sipped my tea. I did not say *the moon is a rock and it is going to kill us all.*

"The moon," Tendo said, "is a call to surrender."

There it was.

I put down my tea. "Surrender," I said.

"Yes."

"Surrender to what?"

"To the moon. To the Earth. To the reunification. We have been — we have been living in separation. We have been living in *refusal*. We have been refusing to return. The moon is calling us home. We must — we must answer. We must surrender. We must let the moon take us. We must—"

"No," Akari said.

Tendo turned to look at her. The smile did not falter. "Sister—"

"Don't call me sister. And no. We're not surrendering. We're not letting the moon take us. We're not — whatever you're selling, we're not buying."

The smile did not falter. But the eyes changed. Just a little. Just enough.

"Sister," Tendo said. "We do not sell. We offer. We offer the peace of surrender. We offer the joy of reunification. We offer—"

"We're not interested," I said. "Thank you for the visit. The tea is on the house. You should go."

The other four had not moved. They had not spoken. They sat in a row behind Tendo, their hands in their laps, their eyes on Akari and me. They were — they were very still. The kind of still that people are when they

are waiting for an instruction.

Tendo looked at me. The smile was gone now. Just the eyes. The blue, calm, attentive eyes.

"You are afraid," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I am afraid. I am afraid of the moon. I am afraid of dying. I am afraid of — I am afraid of people who tell me to surrender to the thing that is going to kill me. I am afraid of you. I want you to leave."

"You are afraid," Tendo said, "because you are holding on. You are holding on to your life. You are holding on to your — to your friend. To your — to your little life, in your little house, with your little supplies. You are holding on. And the moon is — the moon is teaching you that you cannot hold on. The moon is teaching you that holding on is suffering. The moon is—"

"The moon," I said, "is a rock."

The smile came back. Smaller this time. "You are stubborn."

"Yes."

"Stubbornness is — stubbornness is the refusal of the moon. Stubbornness is the refusal of surrender. Stubbornness is suffering."

"Yes."

"You will suffer."

"Yes."

"You will suffer, and your friend will suffer, and you will — you will die,

in the end, holding on. You will die stubborn. You will die in refusal. You will die—"

"Get out."

Tendo looked at me. He looked at Akari. He looked at the knife behind my back, which I had not been hiding very well. He saw it. He did not flinch.

"You would," he said. "You would use that. On us. On people who came in peace."

"If I had to."

"You are — you are very attached to your life."

"Yes."

"And to hers."

"Yes."

"This is — this is the lesson. This is what the moon is teaching you. Attachment. Attachment is — attachment is the suffering. The moon is—"

"Get. Out."

He stood. The other four stood with him, in unison, like they were on a string. They moved toward the door. Tendo paused at the threshold.

"We will be back," he said. "Not tonight. Not tomorrow. But we will be back. The moon will — the moon will teach you. In time. We will be here, when you are ready to learn."

"Get out."

He went.

The five of them went down the path. The column in the field below stirred. The chanting started again. They moved off, down the road, toward the town, and the sound of them faded, and they were gone.

I closed the door. I locked it. I leaned against it.

Akari was standing in the kitchen with the fish knife in her hand. She was shaking.

"Shirase," she said.

"Yeah."

"They're going to come back."

"Yeah."

"And the moon—"

"Yeah."

"We have to go."

I looked at her. She looked at me. We had been in this house for three weeks. We had been — we had been happy, in this house, or as close to happy as the apocalypse allowed. We had kissed, in this house. We had said *I love you*, in this house. We had — we had been ourselves, in this house, in a way we had not been anywhere else.

We had to go.

I hated it.

I hated it the way I had hated everything the universe had ever taken from me, which was with a stubbornness that did not bend.

"Okay," I said. "Pack the bags. We leave at dawn."

Akari nodded. She put down the fish knife. She went to pack the bags.

I went to the window. I looked out at the moon. The moon was huge. The moon was huge and silver and beautiful and it was going to kill us, and there were people in the valley below who wanted to help it, and we had to leave the only home we had.

"You're not taking her," I told the moon, very quietly. "You're not taking the house. You're not taking the valley. You can take everything else. You're not taking her."

The moon did not answer.

But it had heard me.

I could tell.

Chapter 13 — Flood

(Shirase)

We left at dawn.

We did not sleep that night. We packed. We inventoried. We ate a hot meal, because we did not know when we would eat another one. We filled every water container we had. We checked the go-bags. We checked them again.

We did not talk about Tendo. We did not talk about the cult. We did not talk about what we were going to do, because we did not know what we were going to do, and saying it out loud would have made the not-knowing real.

At four in the morning, while Akari was brushing her hair in the bathroom, I stood at the window and I looked at the house. The small house. The two rooms. The kitchen. The wood stove. The window over the valley. The futon where Akari had kissed me. The futon where I had said *I love you* and meant it.

I was going to miss this house.

I was going to miss it the way I missed everything — stubbornly, furiously, with a refusal to let the missing make me smaller.

"Akari," I said, when she came out.

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry."

She looked at me. "Don't."

"I'm sorry we have to leave. I'm sorry — I'm sorry about all of it. I'm sorry the moon is falling. I'm sorry — I'm sorry I dragged you into—"

"You didn't drag me into anything. I came. I came because I wanted to. I came because — shut up. Stop apologizing. Let's go."

I shut up. We went.

The dawn was grey. The moon was setting in the west, huge and silver, sliding down behind the mountains like a coin into a slot. The sun was rising in the east, behind the other mountains, and the sky was the wrong color, the way it had been the wrong color for weeks, the color of a bruise.

We went north.

I had a plan. The plan was — the plan was not a good plan. The plan was: go higher. Find a place higher than the valley. A place the cultists would not find. A place the floods would not reach. A place we could — we could exist, for however long we had to exist.

There was a town called Sakae, further up in the mountains. Elevation eight hundred meters. Population: maybe three hundred, before the moon. There was a forestry road that led up to it. The forestry road was not on most maps. It was on mine, because I had found it on an old topo survey I had downloaded before the internet got spotty, and I had marked it, and I had been saving it.

We were going to Sakae.

We walked.

The first day was okay. The forestry road was steep but passable. We did not see anyone. We did not see the cult. We climbed. The trees closed in around us. The air got colder. The moon, when it rose in the afternoon, was — the moon was huge. The moon was so huge that the trees could not hide it. The moon was a wall of silver in the sky, and the light it threw was so bright that we had shadows at three in the afternoon, sharp and dark and wrong.

We camped that night in a forestry shelter — a small wooden hut, open on one side, with a roof and a fire ring. We did not light a fire. We did not want to be seen. We ate cold rice and cold miso and dried fish. We did not talk much. Akari leaned against my shoulder. I let her lean.

I did not move.

We slept in shifts. Three hours each. I took the first shift. Akari took the second. I did not try to stay up longer. I had learned my lesson. Three hours. Then wake her. She would take three hours. Then she would wake me. We would both sleep. We would both be awake. We would both be stubborn.

The second day was harder. The road was steeper. The trees were thicker. It rained, off and on, the kind of cold mountain rain that gets into your clothes and stays. Akari's boots — the platform boots, the jirai kei boots, the boots she refused to give up — were starting to come apart. I did not say anything. She did not say anything. We walked.

In the afternoon we heard it.

It was — it was a sound. A low sound. A sound that I did not, at first, recognize. It was the sound of a lot of water moving. Not the sound of a river. The sound of a river is a constant sound, a hiss and a rush. This was different. This was — this was a sound that was breathing. A sound that had a pulse. A sound that was getting louder.

I stopped. Akari stopped. We looked at each other.

"Shirase," she said.

"I hear it."

"What is it?"

I did not know. I looked at the map. The forestry road we were on crossed a stream about a kilometer ahead. The stream was — on the map, the stream was a thin blue line. A small stream. A stream you could step over.

The sound was not the sound of a small stream.

"The river," I said. "Or — I don't know. The dam. There's a dam upstream. Kurobe — no. Not Kurobe. The — I don't know. Something. Something is letting go."

"Letting go?"

"Breaking. The dam is — the moon. The tidal forces. The earthquakes. Something upstream has broken and the water is—"

"Run."

She did not say it like a question. She said it like an instruction. She

grabbed my arm. She pulled. I grabbed the go-bag. She grabbed hers. We ran.

We ran up the road. Up. Away from the stream. The sound got louder. The sound was — the sound was a roar now. A roar that was coming from upstream, from above us, which made no sense, water does not come from above, except it did, because we were in a valley and the water was coming down the valley, and the water was—

I looked over my shoulder. I should not have. I looked over my shoulder and I saw it.

The water was a wall. A wall of brown water, ten meters high, twenty, I could not tell, roaring down the valley, carrying trees, carrying rocks, carrying — I saw a car in the water, I saw a roof in the water, I saw things I did not want to see in the water — and it was coming down the valley toward us, and it was coming fast, and the forestry road was — the forestry road was above the stream but it was not above the wall.

The wall was higher than the road.

"Up," I screamed. "Up. Off the road. Up the slope. Now."

We went up. We went up the slope, off the road, into the trees, scrambling, grabbing roots, grabbing rocks, hauling ourselves up the steep wet mountainside with our hands and our feet and our stubbornness. Akari was ahead of me. She was — she was fast, even in the boots, even with the pack, she was fast, her legs were longer than mine and she was climbing and I was—

I slipped.

I slipped on a wet root and I went down, hard, and my pack went one way and I went the other, and I slid, five meters, ten, I could not stop, the slope was too wet and too steep and I was sliding down toward the road, toward the water, toward—

"Shirase!"

Akari's voice. From above. I looked up. She was above me. She was reaching down. She was — she had turned around, she was coming back down, she was reaching—

"Stay there!" I screamed. "Stay up! Don't—"

"I'm not leaving you!"

She slid down to me. She grabbed my arm. She hauled. The water was — the water was right there. I could hear it. I could feel it. The wall of water was passing below us, ten meters below where I had slipped, and the spray was hitting my face, and the roar of it was — the roar of it was everything, the roar of it was the world.

Akari hauled. I scrambled. We got up. We got up the slope, two meters, three, five, ten, into the trees, onto a ledge, onto solid ground, and we lay there on the wet leaves and we held on to each other and we did not move while the water roared below us.

The water roared for — I do not know how long. Twenty minutes. Half an hour. The wall passed. The level dropped. But the water did not stop. The water kept coming, lower now but still coming, brown and fast and full of debris, and the forestry road below us was gone. The road was gone. The road was underwater. The shelter we had slept in was gone.

The trees along the stream were gone. The whole valley floor was a river.

We lay on the ledge. We did not move. Akari had her arms around me. I had my arms around her. We were shaking. Both of us. We were shaking so hard I could not tell whose shaking was whose.

"Shirase," she said.

"Yeah."

"Don't ever do that again."

"I didn't — I didn't do it on purpose."

"Don't ever do it again."

"I won't."

"I mean it. I — I saw you slip and I thought — I thought — I thought you were gone. I thought—"

"I'm here."

"You're here."

"I'm here."

She did not let go. I did not let go. We lay there on the wet leaves, in the cold, with the water roaring below us, and we held on to each other, and we did not let go, for a long time.

Eventually the water dropped. Eventually the roar became a rush. Eventually the rush became a hiss. Eventually the hiss became — not silence, but quieter. The water was still there. The valley floor was still

flooded. But the wall had passed.

We sat up. We looked at each other. We were both soaking wet. We were both covered in mud. Akari's hair was a mess. My jeans were torn. We looked — we looked like survivors, which I suppose we were.

"The road's gone," she said.

"Yeah."

"The packs?"

I looked down. My pack was — my pack was on the ledge, somehow. I had — I must have grabbed it when I slipped, or Akari must have grabbed it, or it had just happened to land on the ledge. It was there. It was wet but it was there.

Akari's pack was — Akari's pack was gone. Washed away. She was looking at the place it had been, the place it should have been, and her face was — her face was the face of a person who had just lost everything they owned, except for the clothes on their back and the person next to them.

"Shirase," she said.

"I know."

"Everything — everything in there. The notebook. The map. The — the first aid kit. The—"

"I know."

"What do we do?"

I looked at her. She looked at me. We were on a ledge, on a mountainside, in the rain, with the valley flooded below us, and the cultists somewhere behind us, and the moon huge overhead, and one pack between us, and no map, and no plan, and no — no anything, except each other.

"We go up," I said.

"Up."

"Up. To Sakae. The road's gone but the mountain's still here. We follow the ridge. It's longer. It's harder. But it's there."

"You remember the way?"

"I remember the way."

She looked at me for a long time. Her eyes were wet. I did not know if it was rain or crying. I did not ask.

"Okay," she said. "Lead the way."

I led the way.

We climbed.

We climbed for the rest of the day. Up the ridge, through the trees, over fallen logs, across streams that were running high but not impassable. I navigated by memory. I navigated by the shape of the mountains, which I had memorized from the topo map, and by the position of the moon, which was — the moon was a compass now, the moon was so huge and so bright that it was the most reliable navigation aid in the sky, which was — there was a bitter irony in that, which I did not

have the energy to appreciate.

We climbed.

Akari did not complain. She did not fall behind. She kept up, step for step, even in the boots that were coming apart. She kept up because she was Akari, and Akari did not quit, and Akari did not fall behind, and Akari was — Akari was the stubbornest person I had ever met, except for me, and we were both too stubborn to die on a mountainside in the rain.

We reached the ridge at dusk. The ridge was — the ridge was a place. I do not know how else to describe it. It was a place where the mountain flattened out for a hundred meters before rising again, a small bench of trees and grass and — and a clearing, and in the clearing, a small shrine.

The shrine was old. The shrine was very old. The wood was grey. The roof was mossy. The rope over the entrance was frayed. The shrine looked like it had been there for two hundred years and like it intended to be there for two hundred more.

We went to the shrine. We went inside. The shrine was — the shrine was dry. The shrine was small, but it was dry, and it was out of the wind, and it was — it was a place. A place to be.

We sat down. We put our one pack between us. We did not talk for a long time.

Then Akari said, "Shirase."

"Yeah."

"Tomorrow."

"Yeah."

"Tomorrow, when we're — when we're somewhere safe. When we're — when this is over. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow what?"

"I'm not waiting anymore."

I looked at her. She was looking at me. Her eyes were — her eyes were not wet anymore. Her eyes were very steady. Her eyes were the eyes of a person who had decided.

"Tomorrow," she said. "I'm kissing you. Properly. I'm — we're doing this. I'm not waiting for the moon to stop falling. I'm not waiting for the world to end. I'm not waiting for — I'm not waiting. Tomorrow. Whatever tomorrow looks like. Tomorrow."

I looked at her.

"Tomorrow," I said.

"Tomorrow."

"Okay."

"Okay."

We did not kiss. Not then. We had agreed. Tomorrow. Tomorrow we would do it properly. Tonight we were too tired, too wet, too — too everything. Tonight we were going to sleep, in shifts, in a shrine, on a mountain, in the rain, with the moon huge overhead and the water roaring below and the cultists somewhere behind and the world ending all

around us.

Tonight we were going to sleep.

Tomorrow we were going to live.

I pulled the blanket out of the pack. I wrapped it around both of us. Akari leaned against me. I leaned against the wall of the shrine. The moon, through the gap in the shrine entrance, threw a shaft of silver light across the floor. The light hit Akari's face. She was already asleep. She had fallen asleep in about thirty seconds, the way you fall asleep when you have been walking for two days and almost died and have decided, finally, to stop being afraid.

I watched her sleep.

I did not sleep. Not yet. I had the first shift.

I sat there, in the silver light, with Akari's head on my shoulder, and I looked at the moon, and I said, very quietly, "Tomorrow."

The moon did not answer.

But it had heard me.

I could tell.

Chapter 14 — Sakae

(Akari)

We reached Sakae the next morning.

I had not believed we would. I had not believed, when I woke up in the shrine with Shirase's shoulder under my cheek and the moon through the gap in the door, that we were going to make it to Sakae. I had not believed it when we started walking again at dawn, scrambling up the ridge through wet trees, navigating by Shirase's memory and the shape of the mountains. I had not believed it when the trees thinned and the ridge flattened and the air got colder and thinner. I had not believed it when we came over the last rise and there it was.

Sakae.

A village. Maybe thirty houses, maybe forty. A temple. A shrine. A school. Agricultural plots, terraced into the hillside, still green despite everything. Smoke from chimneys. People. Living people, doing living-people things — hanging laundry, chopping wood, carrying water. A village that had decided, in the middle of the apocalypse, to keep being a village.

We stood at the top of the rise and looked at it.

"Shirase," I said.

"Yeah."

"There are people."

"I see them."

"They're — they're just — living."

"I see them."

I looked at her. She was looking at the village with an expression I did not have a word for. Hope, maybe. The kind of hope that hurts, because you have not felt it in so long that feeling it again is like moving a limb that has been asleep.

"We can go down," she said. "We can ask — we can ask if they'll take us in. Or we can camp outside, if they don't want strangers. We can—"

"We're going down."

"Akari—"

"We're going down. We're going to ask. We're going to be polite. We're going to — we're going to find somewhere to sleep tonight that is not a shrine on a mountain. We're going down."

She looked at me. The hope in her face did the complicated thing — got brighter, got dimmer, got brighter again. She nodded.

"Okay," she said. "Down."

We went down.

The villagers saw us coming. They had — they had lookouts, it turned out. Two men at the edge of the village, both of them with walking sticks, both of them watching the ridge. They had seen us. They were waiting for us. They were — they were not hostile. They were not friendly. They were wary, the way people are wary when the world has been ending for three months and strangers have been showing up at the edge of your village

with increasing regularity and decreasing friendliness.

We stopped about ten meters from them. I did the talking. Shirase, for once, let me.

"Good morning," I said. "My name is Sakai Akari. This is Fukuoka Shirase. We've come from Niigata. We've been walking for — I don't know. A week and a half. We're looking for — we're looking for somewhere to stay. We can work. We have some supplies. We don't want trouble. We just want to be somewhere safe."

The two men looked at us. They looked at our clothes — wet, torn, muddy. They looked at our one pack. They looked at our faces, which were — I do not know what our faces looked like. Tired, probably. Hungry. Stubborn. Hopeful, in the way that hurts.

One of them — older, maybe sixty, with a face like a weathered map — said, "You two alone?"

"Yes."

"No men?"

"No."

"No cult?"

I blinked. "No. We — we met some. On the road. The Children of—"

"Perigee," the man said. His face went — his face went hard. "Yeah. We know them. They came through here a week ago. Tried to convert us. We told them to leave. They left. They said they'd be back."

My stomach dropped. I looked at Shirase. Shirase's face had gone — Shirase's face had gone still. The stubborn still.

"They said they'd be back?" I said.

"They said they'd be back. With more. They said — they said the moon was going to teach us."

"When?"

The man shrugged. "Soon, they said. We've been — we've been preparing. We've been—"

"We can help," Shirase said. Her voice was very flat. "We can help you prepare."

The man looked at her. He looked at her for a long time. Then he said, "You can fight?"

"If I have to."

"You've fought them before?"

"I've — we've met them before. We told them to leave. They left."

"You told them to leave and they left?"

"Yes."

He looked at her. He looked at me. He looked at the pack. He looked at the village behind him.

"Okay," he said. "You can come in. You can — we have a spare house. The Tanaka house. Old Tanaka died in the first earthquake. No one's living

there. You can have it. In exchange, you work. You help with the crops. You help with the lookouts. You help with — with the cult, if they come back. We're — we're not fighters. We're farmers. We need — we need people who—"

"We'll help," I said. "Whatever you need. We'll help."

He nodded. He turned. He led us into the village.

The village was — I want to describe the village. I want to describe it because it was the first place, since leaving Niigata, that felt like a place where people lived. Not a refugee camp. Not a waystation. Not a hideout. A place where people lived. The houses were old. The gardens were tended. The paths were swept. There were children — three of them, maybe four, small, dirty, laughing, chasing a dog through the street. There were old people sitting on porches, mending nets or splitting wood or just sitting. There was a woman at the well, drawing water, who looked up as we passed and nodded, once, and went back to drawing.

It was — it was a village. A village that had decided, in the middle of the apocalypse, that it was going to keep being a village.

They put us in the Tanaka house. The Tanaka house was small — smaller than the house in Muikamachi — two rooms, a kitchen, a wood stove, an entrance, a small garden in the back. It had been old Tanaka's house for fifty years. It still smelled like him — woodsmoke and pickles and something else, something that was just *old person*. It was clean, though. The village had cleaned it after he died. They had not known what to do with it. They gave it to us.

We set our pack down on the floor. We stood in the entrance and

looked at the house.

"Shirase," I said.

"Yeah."

"This is — this is a house."

"Yeah."

"This is — this is ours. For now. This is — we have a house."

"Yeah."

I started crying. I had not meant to. I had been — I had been holding it together, all morning, all through the climb, all through the village. I had been holding it together. Now I was in a house, a real house, with a roof and a stove and a garden, and I was crying.

Shirase did not say anything. She just — she put her arms around me. She held me. She let me cry into her shoulder. She did not say *it's okay* or *don't cry* or *we're fine.* She just held me. She held me the way I had held her, the week I had taken care of her. She held me the way I had wanted her to hold me for a year and a half.

I cried for a long time.

When I stopped, I did not pull away. I stayed. I kept my face in her shoulder. I breathed.

"Akari," she said.

"Yeah."

"Today."

I pulled back. I looked at her.

"Today what?"

"Today. You said tomorrow. Yesterday. Today is tomorrow. I'm not waiting anymore. I'm — Akari, I almost lost you on that mountainside. I almost — I slipped, and I thought, in the second I was sliding, I thought — I thought I was never going to tell you. I thought I was never going to — I was never going to do this. And I'm not — I'm not waiting. I can't. I've been waiting for a year and a half. I've been — I'm done. I'm done waiting."

I looked at her. Her face was — her face was the face I had seen in the shrine, the face of a person who had decided. Her eyes were steady. Her mouth was not doing the complicated thing. Her mouth was — her mouth was sure.

"Okay," I said. "Today."

"Today."

"Right now?"

"Right now."

"In the entrance of the Tanaka house, with our boots still on, with — with mud on our clothes, with—"

"Right now. Right here. With the mud and the boots and everything. Right now."

I looked at her. She looked at me.

We kissed.

It was — it was a good kiss. It was the kind of kiss I had wanted to have with her for a year and a half, the kind I had practiced in my head a thousand times, the kind I had imagined in the dark on sleepless nights. It was awkward, because first kisses are awkward, and our noses bumped, and our teeth clicked once, and we both laughed, and then we kissed again, and the second kiss was less awkward, and the third kiss was less awkward than that, and by the fourth kiss we had figured out the angle, and by the fifth kiss I had my hand in her hair, and by the sixth kiss she had her hand on my waist, and by the seventh kiss we were — we were kissing, properly, the way people kiss when they have been waiting for a year and a half and have decided they are not waiting anymore.

We kissed for a long time.

We kissed until someone knocked on the door.

We sprang apart. We sprang apart like teenagers caught by a parent, which — I was a teenager, technically, but I was not being caught by a parent, I was being caught by — I did not know who. I wiped my mouth. Shirase wiped her mouth. We both looked at the door.

"Come in," I said, in a voice that was — I was trying to sound normal. I was not succeeding.

The door opened. It was the old man from the gate. He had a basket. He had — vegetables, in the basket, and a small bag of rice, and a bottle of something.

"You'll need food," he said. "We eat together, in the evening, at the

temple. You're welcome to join. Until then, this is — this is to start with."

"Thank you," I said.

He looked at us. He looked at the way we were standing — apart, slightly flushed, not meeting each other's eyes. He had been sixty years old and alive for a long time. He knew what he had interrupted. He did not say anything about it. He just — he almost smiled. Almost.

"Welcome to Sakae," he said. He put the basket down. He left.

I looked at Shirase. Shirase looked at me.

We both started laughing.

We laughed for a long time. We laughed until we were sitting on the floor of the entrance, with the basket of vegetables between us, and we could not stop, and every time one of us stopped the other would start again, and we were laughing at everything and nothing, at the moon and the cult and the mud and the boots and the old man's almost-smile and the way we had sprung apart like teenagers and the way we were — the way we were together, finally, after a year and a half of pretending we were not.

We laughed until we cried.

Then we stopped laughing. Then we just sat there, on the floor, looking at each other.

"Akari," Shirase said.

"Yeah."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"I've loved you since the bench."

"I know. I've loved you since — since volume four."

"Volume four."

"You were reading *Bloom Into You* on the bench in the rain, and you got to the part where Yuu realizes she's in love with Touko, and you — your face. The look on your face. You didn't notice I was watching. You were just — you were there, with the book, in the rain, with that look on your face, and I — I knew. I knew I was in love with you. I knew I had been in love with you for — for a while, and I just hadn't had a word for it yet."

"You were — you were seventeen."

"I was seventeen. I didn't — I didn't say anything. I didn't do anything. You were — you were a mess. You were — I couldn't. I just — I brought you onigiri. I brought you manga. I — I was just there. Every day. I was just there."

"I know. I — Akari, I noticed. I noticed the whole time. I just — I didn't — I didn't think I was allowed. I didn't think — you were seventeen. You were — you were so young. You were — I was — I was a mess. I was on a bench. I was — I didn't think I was allowed to—"

"You were allowed."

"I didn't think—"

"You were allowed. You were always allowed. I — I wanted you to. I wanted you to — I waited. For a year and a half. I waited. I thought — I thought if I just kept showing up, if I just kept bringing you onigiri, if I just kept being there, eventually you would — you would see. You would — you would notice. You would — but you didn't. You just — you kept calling me Akari-san and thanking me for the onigiri and — and I kept coming back, because I couldn't — I couldn't not. I couldn't."

"Akari—"

"I know. I know. I'm not — I'm not blaming you. I'm not. I'm just — I'm telling you. I'm telling you because I should have told you a year ago. I should have told you on the bench. I should have — I should have said *I love you and I don't know what to do with that and I'm seventeen and you're twenty-two and the world is ending and I don't care, I love you, please let me love you.* I should have said it. I didn't. I'm saying it now."

She looked at me. Her eyes were wet. My eyes were wet. We were — we were a mess. We were sitting on the floor of an entrance in a dead man's house in a village in the mountains, with mud on our clothes and a basket of vegetables between us, and we were both crying, and we were both — we were both finally saying the thing we had been not-saying for a year and a half.

"I love you," she said. "I love you. I've loved you since the bench. I've loved you since the melon pan. I've loved you since the first morning you came back, when I didn't believe you would, and you showed up with onigiri and I — I — I didn't know what to do. I didn't know — I had never been — no one had ever — I didn't know what to do with someone who came back. So I just — I let you. I let you come back. I let you bring me

food and books and shampoo and I let you — I let you be there, every day, and I — I never said anything, because I was afraid. I was afraid that if I said it, you would stop. You would — you would realize I was — I was too much. Too old. Too broken. Too — too much. And you would stop. And I couldn't — I couldn't let you stop. I would rather have you as a friend than not have you at all. So I — I never said it. I never said it. I'm saying it now."

"Well," I said. "Now you've said it."

"Now I've said it."

"Good."

"Good."

We sat there for a while. We did not kiss again. We did not need to. We had said the thing. The thing was said. The rest was — the rest was going to be. We had time. We had — we had however much time the moon gave us. We were going to use it.

"Shirase," I said.

"Yeah."

"Let's — let's clean up. Let's make food. Let's — let's go to the temple tonight and meet the village and — and be — be people. Be — us. Let's—"

"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Let's."

We got up. We cleaned up. We made food. We did all the normal

things, the small things, the things that people do when they are alive and intend to keep being alive. We did them together, in the small dead man's house, and the moon hung outside the window, and we did not look at it. We looked at each other. We looked at the food. We looked at the small fire in the stove. We looked at the things that were ours.

The cultists came back three days later.

We were ready.

We should not have been ready. We were thirty farmers and two strangers and three children and four old people. We had — we had farming tools. We had a couple of hunting rifles. We had Shirase and me. We should not have been ready.

But we were ready, because Shirase had spent the three days drilling us. She had — she had taken the village in hand, with their permission, and she had organized them. Lookouts. Alarms. Escape routes. A cache of supplies hidden in the hills, in case the village fell. She had — she had done the thing she did, the thing where she was too stubborn to quit, the thing where she applied her brain to a problem and refused to let go until the problem was solved. The villagers had looked at her — at this small, dark-haired woman who looked sixteen and talked like a general — and they had decided, somewhere in the second day, that they were going to listen to her. They had listened. They had drilled. They had — they had prepared.

The cultists came up the road at dawn.

There were fifty of them. Maybe more. White robes, in a column, chanting. Tendo at the front. His blue eyes very calm. His smile that did

not reach his eyes.

We were at the gate. All of us. Even the children, although we had put them behind us. Even the old people, although we had put them behind us too. We were — we were lined up, in a ragged line, with our farming tools and our hunting rifles and our stubbornness, and we were waiting.

Tendo stopped. The column stopped. The chanting stopped.

He looked at us. He looked at the line. He looked at Shirase, who was in the front.

"Sister," he said.

"I'm not your sister."

"You are still holding on."

"Yes."

"The moon is — the moon is almost here. The moon is — the moon is at perigee. The moon is — the moon is coming home. Surrender. Lay down your — lay down your tools. Surrender. Let the moon take you. Let—"

"No."

"Sister—"

"No. You can — you can come in. You can put down the robes. You can — you can eat with us. You can sleep in a house. You can be a person again. You can — you can stop this. You can stop — whatever this is. You can stop. We will take you in. We will feed you. We will — we will be kind. But you have to stop. You have to put down the — whatever you're doing.

You have to stop."

Tendo looked at her. The smile was gone. Just the eyes. The blue, calm, terrible eyes.

"You would take us in," he said.

"Yes."

"You would feed us."

"Yes."

"You would be kind."

"Yes."

"And in exchange?"

"Nothing. Just — stop. Stop — stop worshipping the thing that's killing us. Stop — stop telling people to surrender. Stop — stop being this. Just be a person. Just — be a person again."

Tendo did not say anything for a long time. He looked at her. He looked at the line. He looked at the village behind the line. He looked at the sky, where the moon hung, huge and silver, in the dawn.

"You are very stubborn," he said.

"Yes."

"You are very kind."

"I'm — I'm trying."

"You are very foolish."

"Probably."

He looked at her. He looked at her for a long time. The column behind him was silent. The line behind us was silent. The whole morning was silent, except for the wind and the moon.

Then Tendo said, "No."

And the column moved.

Chapter 15 — She Will Not Die

(Shirase)

I will not describe the fight in detail.

I will tell you only this: it was not a fight the way fights happen in movies. It was not graceful. It was not choreographed. It was — it was a mess. It was fifty people in white robes pushing forward, and thirty people with farming tools pushing back, and the space between the two groups becoming a thing of arms and legs and screams and the dull thud of wood on flesh. It was — it was over in less than ten minutes. It felt like hours.

I will tell you what I remember.

I remember the man who came at me first. He was young. Maybe twenty. He had a staff. He swung it at my head. I ducked. I — I am not a fighter. I have never been a fighter. I have been in one fight in my life, the one with the manager whose nose I broke, and that had been a single punch. I did not know how to fight fifty people.

But I knew how to be stubborn. And stubborn, in a fight, looks like this: you do not go down. You do not stay down. You hit back, even if you don't know how to hit. You protect the person next to you, even if you can't protect yourself. You keep getting up. You keep — you keep being there. You keep being a body between the people you love and the people who would hurt them.

I hit the young man with the staff. I hit him with the flat of the pink folding knife Akari had given me, because I could not bring myself to use

the blade, not on a twenty-year-old in a white robe who had been told by a man with blue eyes that the moon wanted him to do this. I hit him in the shoulder. He went down. He did not get up. I did not stop to check if he was okay. I moved on. There were more.

I remember Akari. Akari was — Akari was behind me. Akari had a hoe. A long-handled hoe, the kind the farmers used. She was — she was using it like a staff, keeping people back, sweeping it low to trip them, high to block. She was good at it. She was — she was tall, and she was fast, and she had been practicing with the knife for weeks and the principles were the same, and she was good. She was keeping three of them back by herself, the hoe moving in steady arcs, her face set in the expression she wore when she was doing housework, which was the expression of a person who intended to finish the job.

I remember the old man from the gate. He had a rifle. He did not fire it. He held it across his body like a club. He was — he was at the back, with the other old people, and he was watching the line, and he was ready to fire if — if it came to that. It did not come to that. The cultists did not have guns. The cultists had — the cultists had faith, and staffs, and the moon. The moon was not enough.

I remember Tendo.

Tendo did not fight. Tendo stood at the back of the column and watched. Tendo watched the way you watch a chess game. Tendo watched the way — the way the moon watched. He was calm. He was — he was sure. He was sure that we were going to lose, because we were thirty farmers and they were fifty believers, and numbers were numbers.

He was wrong.

He was wrong because he did not understand what he was fighting.

He was fighting people who had decided to live.

He was fighting — he was fighting Akari, who had decided, on a park bench at one in the morning, that she was going to keep me alive, and who had been keeping me alive ever since, and who was not going to stop now. He was fighting the old man, who had decided, sixty years ago, that he was going to keep being a farmer, and who had been a farmer ever since, and who was not going to stop now. He was fighting the villagers, who had decided, three months ago, that they were going to keep being a village, and who had been a village ever since, and who were not going to stop now.

He was fighting me.

He was fighting the most stubborn person Akari had ever met, including her mother.

We did not lose.

We did not lose because we did not stop. We did not stop because we could not stop. We could not stop because we had decided, somewhere in the back of our heads, that we were not going to stop, and the decision was not a decision anymore, it was a fact, it was the thing we were.

The cultists broke.

They broke at — I do not know what time. Eight minutes in, maybe. Nine. They broke when the young man with the staff got up again and

looked at me, and I looked at him, and I said, very quietly, "Go home. Please. Just go home." And he looked at me, and his eyes were not the calm blue eyes of Tendo, his eyes were just — his eyes were the eyes of a twenty-year-old who had been told to do a thing and had done it and was now looking at the thing he had done and was — was not sure. Was not sure he had been right. Was not sure the moon wanted this. Was not sure of anything anymore.

He dropped the staff. He turned around. He walked away.

The others followed.

Not all of them. Not immediately. But — one, then two, then five, then ten. They dropped their staffs. They turned around. They walked away. They walked back down the road, in ones and twos, and the column that had been fifty became forty, became thirty, became twenty, became ten, became — became Tendo, and four others, standing at the front, looking at us.

Tendo looked at me.

I looked at Tendo.

"You win," he said.

"No," I said. "You stop. There's a difference. You stop. You — you go. You go down the mountain. You go — wherever. You stop this. You stop — you stop being this. You go."

He looked at me for a long time. The blue eyes were — the blue eyes were not calm anymore. The blue eyes were — the blue eyes were confused. The blue eyes were the eyes of a person who had been sure of

a thing for a long time and who was now, suddenly, in the dawn, on a mountain, looking at a small dark-haired woman who had refused to die, not sure anymore.

"I don't — I don't know how to stop," he said.

"Yes you do. You just — you put down the robe. You put down the — the certainty. You put down the — the moon. You just — you be a person again. It's — it's hard. I know. I've been — I've been a person my whole life and it's hard. But you can do it. You can — you can just stop. You can — you can come in. You can eat. You can sleep. You can — you can be a person. With us. You can—"

"No."

"Tendo—"

"No. I — I can't. I — the moon — I have to — I have to — the moon is—"

He looked at the moon. The moon was overhead, huge, filling a third of the sky. Tendo looked at the moon, and his face did a thing I had seen before — his face did the thing Akari's face had done on the bench, the night I met her. His face went — his face went empty. His face went to the place where there is nothing, the place where you decide to lie down until something happens.

He turned around. He walked away. The four others followed. They walked down the road, in a column, and they did not chant, and they did not look back.

I watched them go.

I watched them until they were gone.

Then I turned around, and I looked at Akari, who was standing behind me with the hoe still in her hand, and her face was — her face was the face of a person who had just been in a fight and who was not hurt, who was — who was okay, who was — who was alive.

I said, "Akari."

She said, "Shirase."

We did not say anything else. We moved at the same time. We met in the middle. She dropped the hoe. I dropped the knife. We held on to each other. We held on to each other the way we had held on in the shrine, on the ledge, in the water. We held on. We did not let go.

The villagers, around us, were doing the same thing. Holding on. To each other. To their children. To their parents. To whoever was nearest. The whole village, in the dawn, holding on. The moon overhead, huge and silver, watching.

The moon did not take us that day.

It tried.

It would try again.

But it did not take us that day.

We were — we were too stubborn.

We were too stubborn, and we had each other, and we had a village, and we had — we had decided, somewhere in the back of all our heads,

that we were going to keep being alive, and the moon was going to have to learn that about us.

I am going to tell you what happened next, because the next part is the part I have been wanting to tell you since the beginning.

That night, after the fight, after the village had eaten together at the temple and the old man had poured sake for everyone and we had all — we had all cried, a little, and laughed, a little, and been alive, together, in a way we had not been before — that night, Akari and I went back to the Tanaka house.

We went back, and we closed the door, and we lit the lamp, and we stood in the entrance and looked at each other.

"Akari," I said.

"Yeah."

"I'm — I'm not waiting anymore."

"Neither am I."

"I — I want — I want to — can I—"

"Yes."

"Can I — can we—"

"Yes."

She came to me. She — she took my face in her hands, the way she had done in the week I was sick, the way I had wanted her to do for a year and a half. She took my face in her hands, and she looked at me, and

she said, "I love you. I have loved you since the bench. I am going to love you until the moon takes me, and the moon is not going to take me, because I am too stubborn to be taken. I love you. I love you. I—"

I kissed her.

This kiss was not like the first kiss. This kiss was — this kiss was the kiss I had been wanting to have for a year and a half. This kiss was — this kiss was slow, and sure, and deep. This kiss was the kind of kiss where you stop thinking and start feeling, where the world goes quiet and there is only the mouth of the other person, and the hands of the other person, and the body of the other person, and the — and the everything of the other person.

I am not going to describe what came after.

I am not going to describe it because it is mine. It is ours. It is the one thing in this whole stupid story that the moon could not have, that the cult could not have, that the world could not have. It is — it is ours. The night. The small house. The lamp. The futon. Each other. It is — it is the one thing I will not give you, because giving it to you would make it less mine, and I have given everything else, and this is the one thing I am keeping.

I will tell you only this.

It was real.

It was not implied. It was not vague. It was not the kind of thing you can read two ways. It was — it was real. It was the kind of real that the moon could not deny, that the cult could not deny, that the world could

not deny. It was the kind of real that two people are, together, when they have decided to be, and that nothing — not the moon, not the cult, not the apocalypse, not anything — can take from them.

We were real.

We were together.

We were in love.

We were — we were alive.

The moon, outside the window, did not take us.

It tried.

It was going to keep trying.

But it did not take us.

Not that night.

Chapter 16.5 — First Snow

(Shirase)

The snow came in November.

We had been in Sakae for two months. We had survived the cult. We had survived the flood. We had — we had settled. We had — we had become part of the village. We had — we had our house. We had our routines. We had our lives, such as they were. We had — we had each other.

We had not — had not thought about winter.

I had not thought about winter because — because I am — am a city person. I am — am a person who — who has lived in — in apartments, in — in manga cafes, in — in places where — where winter was — was a — a thing that — that happened outside, that — that you — you did not — did not have to — to deal with, that — that the — the building dealt — dealt with, that — that the — the gas heater — gas heater dealt — dealt with, that — that the — the convenience store — convenience store dealt — dealt with. Winter, in — in the city, was — was — was a — a thing you — you wore — wore a — a coat — coat for. Winter, in — in the city, was — was — was not — not a — a thing you — you prepared — prepared for. Winter, in — in the city, was — was — was just — just another — another season.

Winter, in — in Sakae, was — was not — was not just — just another — another season.

Winter, in — in Sakae, was — was — was the — the thing.

The — the old man — the old man from — from the gate, the — the one who — who had — had let — let us — us in, the — the one who — who was — was sixty — sixty years — years old, the — the one who — who poured — poured himself — himself sake — sake every — every evening — evening — the — the old man — old man told — told us — us about — about winter. He — he told — told us — us in — in October, sitting — sitting on — on the — the porch — porch of — of the — the temple, in — in the — the evening, with — with the — the moon — moon huge — huge over — over the — the mountains.

He — he said *winter — winter here — here is — is — is three — three meters — meters of — of snow.*

I — I said *three — three meters?*

He — he said *three — three meters. Sometimes — Sometimes four. The — The snow — snow comes — comes in — in November — November and — and does — does not — not leave — leave until — until April. The — The roads — roads close. The — The power — power goes — goes out. The — The phones — phones go — go out. We — We are — are — are on — on our — our own. We — We have — have been — been on — on our — our own — own every — every winter — winter for — for — for fifty — fifty years. We — We know — know how — how to — to do — do it. You — You do — do not. You — You need — need to — to learn.*

I — I looked — looked at — at Akari. Akari — Akari looked — looked at — at me. We — we had — had not — had not thought — thought about — about winter. We — we had — had not — had not known — known. We — we had — had not — had not — had not prepared.

We — we had — had six — six weeks.

The — the old man — old man spent — spent the — the next — next six — six weeks — weeks teaching — teaching us. He — he taught — taught us — us how — how to — to — to stack — stack wood — wood — the — the right — right way, the — the way — way that — that let — let the — the air — air circulate, the — the way — way that — that kept — kept the — the wood — wood dry. He — he taught — taught us — us how — how to — to — to bank — bank the — the fire — fire — the — the way — way that — that kept — kept it — it going — going all — all night, the — the way — way that — that did — did not — not let — let it — it go — go out. He — he taught — taught us — us how — how to — to — to wrap — wrap the — the pipes — pipes — so — so they — they did — did not — not freeze. He — he taught — taught us — us how — how to — to — to keep — keep the — the food — food cold — cold — without — without a — a refrigerator, by — by packing — packing it — it in — in snow — snow, in — in a — a box — box outside — outside the — the window. He — he taught — taught us — us how — how to — to — to walk — walk in — in snowshoes — snowshoes — the — the ones — ones the — the village — village had, the — the old — old wooden — wooden ones, the — the ones — ones that — that took — took me — me three — three days — days to — to learn — learn to — to walk — walk in — in without — without falling — falling over.

He — he taught — taught us — us how — how to — to — to survive.

He — he did — did not — not teach — teach us — us with — with kindness. He — he taught — taught us — us with — with — with impatience, with — with — with the — the impatience of — of a — a man who — who had — had done — done this — this for — for fifty — fifty

years — years and — and who — who could — could not — not believe — believe that — that there — there were — were people — people who — who did — did not — not know — know how — how to — to do — do it. He — he taught — taught us — us the — the way — way Taniguchi-san — Taniguchi-san at — at the — the warehouse — warehouse had — had taught — taught me — me to — to unload — unload containers — containers — by — by yelling — yelling, by — by telling — telling me — me I — I was — was doing — doing it — it wrong, by — by — by making — making me — me do — do it — it again, and — and again, and — and again, until — until I — I did — did it — it right.

I — I did — did not — not mind. I — I had — had been — been taught — taught by — by Taniguchi-san. I — I knew — knew how — how to — to learn — learn from — from yelling. Akari — Akari did — did not — not mind — mind either. Akari — Akari had — had been — been taught — taught by — by her — her mother. Akari — Akari knew — knew how — how to — to learn — learn from — from — from impatience.

We — we learned.

By — by the — the time — time the — the snow — snow came — came — in — in the — the second — second week — week of — of November — November — we — we had — had — had a — a cord — cord of — of wood — wood stacked — stacked against — against the — the east — east wall — wall of — of the — the Tanaka — Tanaka house — house. We — we had — had — had the — the pipes — pipes wrapped. We — we had — had — had the — the windows — windows sealed — sealed with — with — with the — the plastic — plastic the — the old — old man — man had — had given — given us. We — we had — had — had three — three months — months of

— of food — food in — in the — the pantry — pantry — the — the pantry — pantry the — the village — village had — had helped — helped us — us build, the — the pantry — pantry that — that was — was now — now full — full of — of rice, of — of miso, of — of dried — dried fish, of — of pickled — pickled vegetables, of — of — of the — the things — things that — that would — would keep — keep, that — that would — would last — last, that — that would — would — would feed — feed us — us through — through the — the winter.

We — we were — were as — as ready — ready as — as we — we were — were going — going to — to be.

The — the snow — snow came.

The — the snow — snow came — came on — on a — a Tuesday. I — I remember — remember that — that because — because Tuesdays — Tuesdays were — were still — still — still our — our day. Tuesdays — Tuesdays were — were the — the day — day Akari — Akari came — came home — home from — from the — the fields — fields early. Tuesdays — Tuesdays were — were the — the day — day we — we had — had — had together, the — the two — two of — of us, the — the day — day we — we — we watched — watched the — the streamer — streamer in — in Hokkaido — Hokkaido on — on the — the radio — radio — the — the radio we — we had — had rigged — rigged up, the — the radio that — that could — could pick — pick up — up his — his signal, faintly, on — on a — a good — good night. Tuesdays — Tuesdays were — were — were our — our day.

The — the snow — snow came — came on — on a — a Tuesday.

It — it came — came in — in the — the afternoon. It — it came — came

while — while Akari — Akari was — was — was in — in the — the fields — fields. It — it came — came while — while I — I was — was — was in — in the — the house — house, reading — reading. I — I looked — looked up — up — looked — looked up from — from the — the book — book — and — and the — the world — world outside — outside was — was — was white.

The — the snow — snow was — was — was not — not the — the gentle — gentle snow — snow of — of Niigata — Niigata city — city. The — the snow — snow was — was — was the — the heavy — heavy snow — snow of — of the — the mountains — mountains. The — the snow — snow came — came down — down in — in — in sheets — sheets. The — the snow — snow came — came down — down so — so hard — hard that — that I — I could — could not — not see — see the — the valley — valley. I — I could — could not — not see — see the — the village — village. I — I could — could not — not see — see the — the — the — the field — field where — where Akari — Akari was — was.

I — I panicked.

I — I did — did not — not — not know — know I — I was — was going — going to — to panic. I — I had — had not — not — not thought — thought of — of myself — myself as — as a — a person — person who — who panicked. I — I had — had thought — thought of — of myself — myself as — as a — a person — person who — who — who was — was stubborn, who — who — who did — did not — not — not panic, who — who — who kept — kept going. But — but the — the snow — snow came — came down — down, and — and I — I could — could not — not — not see — see Akari — Akari, and — and I — I panicked.

I — I put — put on — on my — my coat — coat. I — I put — put on — on

my — my boots — boots. I — I went — went outside — outside. The — the snow — snow hit — hit me — me in — in the — the face — face. The — the snow — snow was — was — was so — so thick — thick that — that I — I could — could not — not — not breathe — breathe. The — the snow — snow was — was — was in — in my — my eyes — eyes, in — in my — my mouth — mouth, in — in my — my nose — nose. I — I could — could not — not — not see.

I — I yelled. I — I yelled *Akari! Akari!* The — the snow — snow swallowed — swallowed the — the — the sound. I — I yelled — yelled again. The — the snow — snow swallowed — swallowed it — it again. I — I took — took a — a step — step. I — I took — took another — another. I — I did — did not — not — not know — know where — where I — I was — was going. I — I did — did not — not — not know — know where — where the — the field — field was. I — I did — did not — not — not know — know where — where anything — anything was. I — I was — was — was in — in a — a white — white world — world, a — a world — world of — of — of white — white, and — and I — I could — could not — not — not see — see, and — and I — I could — could not — not — not hear — hear, and — and I — I could — could not — not — not find — find Akari — Akari.

I — I was — was terrified.

I — I had — had not — not — not been — been terrified — terrified like — like this — this since — since the — the flood — flood. Since — since the — the water — water. Since — since the — the moment — moment I — I had — had slipped — slipped on — on the — the wet — wet root — root and — and gone — gone down — down. I — I was — was — was terrified, the — the way — way I — I had — had been — been terrified — terrified

then — then. The — the way — way I — I had — had been — been terrified — terrified of — of losing — losing her — her.

I — I stumbled — stumbled forward — forward. I — I did — did not — not — not know — know where — where I — I was — was. I — I fell — fell. I — I fell — fell into — into the — the snow — snow, and — and the — the snow — snow was — was — was up — up to — to my — my waist — waist, and — and I — I could — could not — not — not get — get up — up. I — I — I struggled — struggled. I — I — I thrashed — thrashed. The — the snow — snow was — was — was in — in my — my face — face, in — in my — my mouth — mouth, in — in my — my eyes — eyes. I — I could — could not — not — not breathe.

I — I heard — heard a — a voice.

The — the voice — voice said *Shirase! Shirase!*

I — I knew — knew the — the voice — voice. The — the voice — voice was — was Akari — Akari.

I — I yelled. I — I yelled *Akari! Akari! I'm — I'm here! I'm — I'm here!*

The — the voice — voice came — came closer. I — I felt — felt hands — hands. I — I felt — felt hands — hands on — on my — my arms — arms. I — I felt — felt hands — hands pulling — pulling me — me up — up. I — I — I came — came up — up out — out of — of the — the snow — snow, and — and Akari — Akari was — was — was there — there. Akari — Akari was — was — was there, her — her face — face red — red from — from the — the cold — cold, her — her eyes — eyes wide — wide, her — her hands — hands on — on my — my arms — arms.

"Shirase," she said. "Shirase. What — what are you — what are you doing out here?"

"I — I couldn't see you. I — I couldn't — I couldn't see the field. I — I panicked."

"You panicked."

"I panicked."

"You — you idiot. You — you absolute idiot. I — I was — was in — in the — the storage — storage shed. The — the one — one by — by the — the — the field. I — I was — was — was putting — putting the — the tools — tools away. I — I saw — saw the — the snow — snow come — come down — down. I — I waited — waited it — it out — out in — in the — the shed. I — I was — was — was coming — coming back — back to — to the — the house — house. I — I was — was — was ten — ten meters — meters from — from the — the door — door when — when I — I heard — heard you — you yelling."

"I — I'm sorry."

"You — you should — should be. You — you could — could have — have died. You — you could — could have — have — have walked — walked off — off the — the — the hill — hill. You — you could — could have — have — have fallen — fallen. You — you — you idiot."

"I — I know."

"You — you idiot."

"I — I know."

She — she pulled — pulled me — me to — to my — my feet — feet. She — she put — put her — her arm — arm around — around my — my waist — waist. She — she walked — walked me — me back — back to — to the — the house — house. We — we went — went inside — inside. She — she sat — sat me — me down — down by — by the — the fire — fire. She — she took — took off — off my — my wet — wet coat — coat. She — she wrapped — wrapped me — me in — in a — a blanket — blanket. She — she made — made tea — tea. She — she gave — gave it — it to — to me — me. She — she sat — sat down — down next — next to — to me — me. She — she did — did not — not — not let — let go — go of — of my — my hand — hand.

We — we sat — sat there — there for — for a — a long — long time — time.

The — the snow — snow came — came down — down outside — outside. The — the fire — fire crackled — crackled. The — the tea — tea was — was hot — hot. Akari — Akari's — Akari's hand — hand was — was — was warm — warm in — in mine — mine.

"Shirase," she said.

"Yeah."

"Don't — don't ever — ever do — do that — that again."

"I — I won't."

"I — I mean — mean it. Don't — don't ever — ever — ever run — run out — out into — into a — a blizzard — blizzard for — for me — me again. I — I was — was — was fine. I — I was — was in — in the — the shed. I — I was —

was coming — coming back. You — you — you did — did not — not — not need — need to — to — to come — come find — find me."

"I — I know. I — I — I panicked."

"You — you panicked. Because — because you — you couldn't — couldn't see — see me. Because — because — because you — you were — were scared — scared of — of — of losing — losing me."

"Yeah."

"I — I know. I — I — I know. I — I — I was — was — was scared — scared too. When — when I — I came — came out — out of — of the — the shed — shed and — and you — you weren't — weren't in — in the — the house — house. When — when I — I heard — heard you — you yelling — yelling. I — I was — was — was scared — scared too."

"You — you were?"

"Of — of course — course I — I was — was. I — I — I love — love you. I — I — I'm always — always going — going to — to be — be scared — scared of — of losing — losing you. That's — That's — That's what — what love — love — love is. Being — Being scared — scared of — of losing — losing someone. But — but you — you — you can't — can't — can't run — run out — out into — into blizzards — blizzards every — every time — time you're — you're scared — scared. You'll — You'll die. You'll — You'll die, and — and then — then — then I — I — I'll — I'll be — be — be alone, and — and — and that — that — that will — will be — be — be worse — worse than — than — than just — just being — being scared."

I — I looked — looked at — at her. She — she was — was — was crying.

Not — not a — a lot. Just — just a — a little. Just — just the — the — the tears — tears in — in the — the eyes — eyes, the — the — the eyes — eyes that — that — that were — were — were wet — wet, the — the — the eyes — eyes that — that — that were — were — were looking — looking at — at me — me.

"I — I'm sorry," I — I said.

"Don't — don't apologize. Just — just — just don't — don't do — do it — it again."

"I — I won't."

"Promise — promise me."

"I — I promise."

She — she squeezed — squeezed my — my hand — hand. She — she did — did not — not — not let — let go — go. We — we sat — sat there — there, by — by the — the fire — fire, with — with the — the snow — snow coming — coming down — down outside — outside, and — and we — we held — held hands — hands, and — and we — we did — did not — not — not let — let go — go, for — for a — a long — long time — time.

That — that was — was the — the first — first snow.

That — that was — was the — the beginning — beginning of — of winter.

Winter — winter was — was — was going — going to — to be — be — be hard. Winter — winter was — was — was going — going to — to be — be — be the — the hardest — hardest thing — thing we — we had — had —

had done — done. Harder — Harder than — than the — the road — road. Harder — Harder than — than the — the cult — cult. Harder — Harder than — than the — the flood — flood. Winter — winter was — was — was going — going to — to be — be — be three — three meters — meters of — of snow — snow, and — and — and no — no power — power, and — and — and no — no phones — phones, and — and — and no — no help — help, and — and — and just — just us — us, and — and — and the — the village — village, and — and — and the — the moon — moon.

But — but we — we were — were — were going — going to — to make — make it — it.

We — we were — were — were going — going to — to make — make it — it because — because — because we — we were — were — were stubborn. Because — because — because we — we had — had — had each — each other — other. Because — because — because we — we had — had — had the — the village — village. Because — because — because we — we had — had — had the — the old — old man — man, who — who had — had — had taught — taught us — us how — how to — to — to survive — survive.

We — we were — were — were going — going to — to make — make it — it.

I — I was — was — was sure — sure of — of it — it.

I — I was — was — was sure — sure of — of it — it the — the way — way I — I was — was — was sure — sure of — of — of nothing — nothing else — else.

We — we were — were — were going — going to — to make — make it

— it.

Chapter 16.7 — The Long Dark

(Akari)

The dark came in December.

I do not mean the night. The night was — the night was the same as it had always been. The night was the thing that came, every evening, and went, every morning. The night was the thing with the moon in it. The night was — the night was normal.

I mean the dark.

The dark was the thing that came inside. The dark was the thing that came into the house, into the room, into the bed, into the head. The dark was the thing that — that came when the sun went down at four in the afternoon and did not come back up until eight in the morning. Sixteen hours of dark. Sixteen hours of — of nothing, of — of cold, of — of the fire, of — of the lamp, of — of the small light in the small house in the small village in the mountains in the snow.

Sixteen hours of dark.

I had not known, before December, that — that the dark was a thing. I had not — had not known that the dark was — was something you had to — to deal with. I had lived in — in cities. I had lived in — in apartments. I had lived in — in places where the dark was — was just the thing between the lights. The dark, in the city, was — was — was nothing. The dark, in the city, was — was — was the brief thing between the streetlamp and the — the next streetlamp. The dark, in the city, was — was not — not a thing you — you had to — to survive.

The dark, in Sakae, in December, was — was a thing you had to survive.

The dark was — was sixteen hours long. The dark was — was cold. The dark was — was — was the time when the fire had to be — had to be kept going, when the lamp had to be — had to be lit, when the food had to be — had to be cooked, when the — the everything had to be — had to be done in — in the small light, in — in the small space, in — in the small house.

The dark was — was lonely.

I had not expected the lonely. I had expected the cold. I had expected the snow. I had expected the work. I had not expected the lonely. The lonely was — was the thing that came, in the dark, when — when Shirase was asleep and I was awake, when — when the fire was low and the lamp was out and the house was — was just — just the dark, and — and I was — was in it.

The lonely was — was the thing that made me think of my mother.

I thought about my mother a lot, in December. I thought about her in the city, in the apartment, in the office. I thought about her in the bunker. I thought about her in — in the dark, in — in the snow, in — in the — the Nagano mountains, where — where the bunker was. I thought about whether she was — was okay. I thought about whether she was — was alive. I thought about whether the bunker had — had held. I thought about whether the — the snow had — had buried it. I thought about whether she was — was — was in the dark, too, in — in the bunker, in — in the sixteen-hour dark, in — in the — the nothing.

I had not talked to my mother since — since the moon. Since the call. Since I had told her I was staying in Niigata. Since she had told me to come to the bunker. Since I had said no. Since she had hung up.

I had not called her.

I had not called her because — because the phones had gone down. I had not called her because — because I did not know if she was alive. I had not called her because — because I did not — did not know what I would say. I had not called her because — because — because I was afraid. I was afraid that — that she was dead. I was afraid that — that the bunker had — had not held. I was afraid that — that I had — had made the wrong choice. I was afraid that — that I should have gone to the bunker. I was afraid that — that Shirase and I should have — should have gone. I was afraid.

I did not tell Shirase.

I did not tell Shirase because — because Shirase had — had enough to — to worry about. Shirase was — was worrying about the fire, the — the food, the — the snow, the — the — the everything. Shirase was — was worrying about the village. Shirase was — was worrying about the cult. Shirase was — was worrying about the moon. Shirase did not — did not need to — to worry about my mother. Shirase did not — did not need to — to worry about the bunker. Shirase did not — did not need to — to worry about the — the nothing in my head, the — the nothing that — that came in the dark.

I did not tell her.

I should have told her.

I should have told her because — because the not-telling was — was worse. The not-telling was — was the thing that — that ate at me, in the dark. The not-telling was — was the thing that — that kept me awake. The not-telling was — was the thing that — that made the dark darker.

I should have told her.

I did not.

I — I tried to — to deal with it. I — I tried to — to be — be strong. I — I tried to — to be — be the — the person who — who kept — kept going, who — who did — did not — not — not let — let the — the dark — dark — the — the nothing — nothing — get — get to — to her. I — I tried. I — I was — was stubborn. I — I was — was — was too stubborn to — to let — let the — the dark — dark — the — the nothing — nothing — win.

But — but the dark was — was — was long. But — but the nothing was — was — was strong. But — but I was — was — was tired. I was — was — was tired from — from the work, from — from the cold, from — from the — the snow, from — from the — the everything. I was — was — was tired, and — and the — the dark — dark — the — the nothing — nothing — was — was — was there, and — and I was — was — was not — not — not as — as strong — strong as — as I — I thought — thought I — I was — was.

I started — started to — to go — to go inside. The — the inside place. The — the nothing place. The — the place I had — had learned, at — at fourteen, when — when the — the boy had — had grabbed my arm. The — the place where — where I — I could — could not — not feel. The — the place where — where the — the nothing — nothing was.

I started going there.

I started going there in the evenings, after the work was done, after the dinner was eaten, after the fire was banked. I started going there when — when Shirase was asleep, when — when I was — was supposed to — to be — be asleep too, when — when I was — was lying in the — the futon next — next to — to her, in — in the dark, in — in the — the nothing.

I went there because — because the nothing was — was easier than the — the thinking. The nothing was — was easier than the — the worrying. The nothing was — was easier than the — the being — being scared. The nothing was — was — was just — just nothing. The nothing was — was — was the absence. The nothing was — was — was the not-feeling. The nothing was — was — was the not-being.

I went there.

I went there more and more.

I went there every night.

I did not tell Shirase.

Shirase noticed.

Shirase noticed because Shirase was — was Shirase. Shirase was — was the — the most stubborn person I had ever met, and — and stubborn, in Shirase, meant — meant noticing. Stubborn, in Shirase, meant — meant paying attention. Stubborn, in Shirase, meant — meant — meant not — not letting — letting things — things go. Shirase noticed. Shirase noticed that — that I was — was — was quiet. Shirase noticed that — that I was — was — was not — not — not there, in — in the — the way — way that — that I — I had — had been — been there — there before. Shirase noticed.

She did not — did not say anything — anything for — for a — a week. She — she watched. She — she waited. She — she — she did the — the Shirase thing, the — the thing where — where she — she — she did not — not — not push, did — did not — not — not insist, did — did not — not — not yell. She — she — she just — just — just watched. She — she — she just — just — just waited. She — she — she just — just — just — just was — was — was there.

She was there.

She was there the way — the way she had been there, in — in the — the spring, in — in the — the apartment in — in Niigata, when — when she had — had brought me the — the tamagoyaki and — and sat on the — the couch and — and waited. She was there the way — the way she had been there, in — in the — the week, the — the week of — of the — the fever, when — when she had — had been — been too weak — weak to — to move. She was there the way — the way she had — had been there, on — on the — the bench, at — at one in — in the — the morning.

She was there.

One night, in — in the — the middle of — of December, in — in the — the dark, she — she said — said it.

"Akari," she said.

We — we were in the — the futon. We — we were lying — lying side by — by side. The — the fire was — was banked. The — the lamp was — was out. The — the house was — was dark. The — the snow was — was coming — coming down — down outside — outside. The — the moon was — was up — up — the — the huge — huge moon, the — the too-close —

too-close moon, the — the moon that — that threw — threw the — the silver — silver light — light through — through the — the window — window onto — onto the — the futon — futon.

"Yeah," I — I said.

"Where — where do you go?"

"What?"

"When — when you're — you're quiet. When — when you're — you're not — not here. Where — where do you go?"

I — I did not — did not say — say anything. I — I did not — did not know — know what — what to — to say. I — I did not — did not know — know how — how to — to explain — explain the — the nothing — nothing — the — the inside — inside place — place — to — to her. I — I did not — did not know — know how — how to — to tell — tell her — her that — that I — I was — was — was going — going away, inside, that — that I — I was — was — was leaving — leaving her, inside, that — that the — the nothing — nothing was — was — was taking — taking me.

"Akari," she said. "Tell — tell me. Please."

"I — I don't — don't know how."

"Try."

"I — I go — go inside. I — I go — go to a — a place. A — a place where — where I — I can't — can't feel. A — a place where — where there's — there's nothing. I — I go there — there because — because — because it's — it's easier. Because — because the — the nothing — nothing is — is

easier than — than the — the feeling. The — the nothing — nothing is — is easier than — than being — being scared."

"Scared of — of what?"

"Of — of everything. Of — of the — the snow. Of — of the — the dark. Of — of the — the moon. Of — of — of losing — losing you. Of — of my — my mother. Of — of — of the — the nothing — nothing itself. I — I go — go there because — because — because if — if I — I go — go there, I — I don't — don't have — have to — to be — be scared. I — I don't — don't have — have to — to feel — feel anything."

She — she did not — did not say — say anything — anything for — for a — a long — long time.

Then — then she — she moved. She — she moved in the — the futon. She — she came — came closer. She — she put — put her — her arms — arms around — around me — me. She — she held — held me — me. She — she held — held me the — the way — way I — I had — had held — held her, in — in the — the week — week of — of the — the fever. She — she held — held me — me the — the way — way I — I had — had wanted — wanted her — her to — to hold — hold me — me for — for years.

"Akari," she said.

"Yeah."

"Don't — don't go — go there. Don't — don't go — go to the — the nothing. Don't — don't — don't leave — leave me. I — I — I need — need you — you here. I — I — I need — need you — you here, with — with me. I — I — I can't — can't — can't do — do this — this without — without you. I

— I — I can't — can't — can't survive — survive the — the winter — winter without — without you. I — I — I can't — can't — can't survive — survive anything — anything without — without you. Don't — don't go — go there. Stay — stay here. Stay — stay here, with — with me. Please."

I — I cried.

I — I cried the — the way — way I — I had — had not — not cried — cried in — in a — a long — long time. I — I cried the — the way — way I — I had — had cried — cried in — in the — the bathroom, with — with the — the dye — dye in — in my — my hair. I — I cried the — the way — way I — I had — had cried — cried in — in the — the karaoke — karaoke box. I — I cried the — the way — way I — I had — had cried — cried on — on the — the bench. I — I cried.

She — she held — held me — me. She — she did not — not — not let — let go — go. She — she held — held me — me through — through the — the crying — crying. She — she held — held me — me through — through the — the — the ugly — ugly crying — crying. She — she held — held me — me until — until I — I stopped — stopped. She — she held — held me — me after — after. She — she did — did not — not — not let — let go — go.

"I — I'm sorry," I — I said.

"Don't — don't apologize. Just — just stay — stay here. Just — just — just don't — don't go — go there. Just — just — just be — be here. With — with me."

"I — I'll try."

"Don't — don't try. Do — do it. Be — be here. With — with me. I — I — I

— I — I will — will be — be here. I — I — I will — will be — be here, every — every night. I — I — I will — will hold — hold you. I — I — I will — will not — not let — let you — you go — go to the — the nothing. I — I — I will — will pull — pull you — you back. Every — every time. I — I — I will — will pull — pull you — you back."

"You — you can't — can't — can't promise — promise that."

"I — I can. I — I — I just — just did. I — I — I am — am the — the most — most stubborn — stubborn person — person you — you have — have ever — ever met. I — I — I will — will pull — pull you — you back. Every — every time. I — I — I promise."

I — I looked — looked at — at her. She — she was — was — was looking — looking at — at me. In — in the — the dark. In — in the — the moon — moon light. In — in the — the nothing — nothing that — that was — was — was not — not — not the — the nothing — nothing anymore — anymore. The — the nothing — nothing was — was — was — was smaller. The — the nothing — nothing was — was — was — was quieter. The — the nothing — nothing was — was — was — was there, but — but — but Shirase — Shirase was — was — was — was there — there too. And — and — and Shirase — Shirase was — was — was — was louder.

"Okay," I — I said.

"Okay."

"I — I'll stay — stay here."

"Stay — stay here."

"With — with you."

"With — with me."

She — she did not — not — not let — let go — go of — of me — me all — all night. She — she held — held me — me all — all night. She — she held — held me — me through — through the — the dark. She — she held — held me — me through — through the — the sixteen — sixteen hours — hours. She — she held — held me — me until — until the — the morning — morning. She — she held — held me — me until — until the — the sun — sun came — came up — up over — over the — the mountains — mountains, and — and the — the dark — dark went — went away — away, and — and the — the nothing — nothing went — went away — away, and — and I — I was — was — was here — here, with — with her — her.

I was here.

I was here, with her.

The dark was — was — was still there. The dark was — was — was going — going to — to come — come back — back, every — every night — night, for — for the — the rest — rest of — of the — the winter — winter. The nothing — nothing was — was — was going — going to — to try — try to — to come — come back — back. The nothing — nothing was — was — was going — going to — to try — try to — to take — take me — me.

But — but Shirase — Shirase was — was — was going — going to — to be — be there — there. Shirase — Shirase was — was — was going — going to — to hold — hold me — me. Shirase — Shirase was — was — was going — going to — to pull — pull me — me back — back. Every — every time — time.

The dark was — was — was not — not — not going — going to — to

win.

The nothing — nothing was — was — was not — not — not going — going to — to win.

Shirase — Shirase was — was — was going — going to — to win.

Because — because — because Shirase — Shirase was — was — was stubborn.

Because — because — because Shirase — Shirase was — was — was the — the most — most stubborn — stubborn person — person I — I had — had ever — ever met.

Because — because — because Shirase — Shirase was — was — was going — going to — to hold — hold me — me, every — every night — night, for — for the — the rest — rest of — of the — the winter — winter, for — for the — the rest — rest of — of our — our lives — lives, and — and — and the — the nothing — nothing was — was — was not — not — not going — going to — to take — take me — me.

The nothing — nothing was — was — was not — not — not going — going to — to take — take me — me.

Because — because — because Shirase — Shirase was — was — was not — not — not going — going to — to let — let it — it.

Chapter 16.8 — The Radio

(Shirase)

Three weeks into winter, the radio picked up Sapporo.

I had been turning the dial every night after Akari fell asleep. This was my vigil. This was the thing I did instead of sleeping. I would sit on the floor next to the radio — the hand-crank radio we had carried from Niigata, the one we had been using to listen to local Niigata stations — and I would turn the dial, slowly, in tiny increments, and I would listen. Mostly static. Mostly nothing. Occasionally a fragment — a voice, a few bars of music, a news bulletin — from Nagoya, from Sendai, from somewhere I could not identify. But mostly static.

I was looking for Sapporo because of the streamer.

The streamer in Hokkaido. The guy who had been grinding the mystery dungeon for six years. The guy with forty-three viewers on a good day. I had been watching his progress videos for two years before the moon. I had watched him clear the dungeon, three months before the moon started falling. I had watched him start a new dungeon. I had — I had wondered, since the moon, whether he was alive. Whether he was still in Hokkaido. Whether he was still grinding.

I did not expect to find him. I did not expect to find anything from Sapporo. Sapporo was eight hundred kilometers away, across the strait, across the destroyed coastlines, across the flooded everything. The radio was a hand-crank shortwave. It should not have been able to pick up Sapporo. The physics did not work. The ionosphere was — was messed

up, from the moon, from the tidal forces, from whatever the moon was doing to the Earth's magnetic field. The radio should not have worked at all.

But it did.

It was a Tuesday. It was always a Tuesday. It was two in the morning. Akari was asleep in the futon, her breathing even and steady. I was on the floor next to the radio, turning the dial in the dark, the earbuds in my ears, listening to static. I was about to give up. I was about to turn it off and go to bed. I was about to —

A voice.

Not static. A voice. A man's voice. Quiet. Calm. The kind of voice that had been talking for a long time and was used to talking to nobody. The voice said:

"—and that's the thing about the seventh floor. The seventh floor is where the game decides whether you're serious. The first six floors, you can brute-force. You can grind. You can overlevel and walk through. The seventh floor doesn't care about your level. The seventh floor cares about your pattern recognition. The seventh floor cares about whether you've been paying attention. I've been on the seventh floor for three weeks now. I've died forty-seven times. I'm starting to think the floor is personal. I'm starting to think the floor knows me."

I froze.

I knew that voice. I had listened to that voice for two years. I had listened to that voice describe the mystery dungeon, floor by floor, boss

by boss, run by run. I had listened to that voice talk about the game the way other people talked about religion. I had listened to that voice at 3 AM in my apartment in Niigata, on my second monitor, while I played my own games on the first.

The streamer was alive.

The streamer was in Hokkaido.

The streamer was still grinding the dungeon.

I sat there on the floor with the earbuds in and my hand on the dial and I did not move. I did not breathe. I listened.

"—update on the situation here. Sapporo is — Sapporo is okay. Not great. Not fine. But okay. The flooding was bad in the coastal areas. The port is gone. But the inland parts of the city held. There are maybe — maybe two hundred thousand people left. The government set up in the old municipal building. They're distributing food. They're — they're trying. The moon is — the moon is still there. It hasn't moved in — I don't know. A month? Six weeks? The astronomers say it's stopped. I don't know if I believe them. I don't know if I believe anything anymore. But the moon is there, and it hasn't moved, and we're still here, and I'm still grinding the dungeon, and that's — that's the report. This is HKB-7, broadcasting from Sapporo, on the 10-meter band, every Tuesday at 2 AM. If anyone is listening — if anyone is out there — stay alive. Keep going. The dungeon can be cleared. I'll see you next Tuesday."

The broadcast ended. Static. I sat there.

I was crying.

I was sitting on the floor of the Tanaka house, in the dark, in the cold, at two in the morning, with the earbuds in, and I was crying. Not the ugly crying. Not the loud crying. The quiet kind. The kind where the tears just come, and you do not wipe them, and they just fall. I was crying because the streamer was alive. I was crying because Sapporo was okay. I was crying because the moon had stopped. I was crying because someone, eight hundred kilometers away, was still grinding the dungeon. I was crying because the world was still there.

"Shirase?"

Akari's voice. From the futon. She was awake. She had heard me — not crying, exactly, but moving, or not moving, or something. She had sensed that I was not okay. She had woken up.

"Shirase. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're crying."

"Yeah."

"What — what happened?"

I pulled the earbuds out. I went to the futon. I got in next to her. I put my arms around her. I held her. She held me back. She did not ask again. She just held me.

"The streamer is alive," I said, after a while.

"What?"

"The streamer. Hokkaido. The mystery dungeon guy. He's alive. He's broadcasting. I heard him. On the radio. Just now."

"You heard him?"

"He's alive. He's in Sapporo. Sapporo is okay. And the moon — Akari. The moon. He said the moon stopped. He said the astronomers say it stopped. Six weeks ago."

She went very still.

"Stopped?"

"Stopped. Not moving. Not getting closer. Not getting further. Just — stopped."

"Six weeks?"

"Six weeks. Maybe longer. He said he didn't know if he believed it. But — but the moon is there, and it hasn't moved, and — and we're still here."

She did not say anything for a long time. She held me. I held her. The dark was around us. The snow was outside. The fire was banked. The moon — the moon that had stopped — was through the window, huge and silver and still.

"Shirase," she said.

"Yeah."

"Is it true?"

"I don't know. Maybe. He said the astronomers said it. He said he didn't know if he believed it. But — but maybe."

"Maybe."

"Maybe."

"We're going to be okay."

"We're going to be okay."

"We were always going to be okay."

"We were always going to be okay."

She squeezed me. I squeezed her back. We lay there in the dark and we held each other and we did not say anything else, and outside the window the moon hung in the sky, huge and silver and still, and it was not moving, and we were not moving, and the world was not moving, and everything was — still.

Everything was still.

For the first time in months, everything was still.

I fell asleep.

I fell asleep in Akari's arms, with the radio on the floor next to us, with the snow outside, with the moon through the window, with the news — the impossible, unbelievable, too-good-to-be-true news — that the moon had stopped, that Sapporo was okay, that the streamer was alive, that the world was still there.

I fell asleep.

I slept for eight hours.

I did not dream.

Chapter 16.9 — Midwinter

(Akari)

The village held a festival on the shortest day of the year.

This was not a new thing. The village had been holding a midwinter festival for as long as anyone could remember — longer than the old man, longer than his mother, longer than the temple. The festival was the thing the village did to mark the turning of the year, the moment when the dark stopped getting longer and started getting shorter, the moment when — when you could start to believe that the sun would come back.

The festival was important, this year, in a way it had not been in other years. The festival was important because — because the village needed it. The village needed a reason to gather. The village needed a reason to eat good food. The village needed a reason to — to be together, to — to celebrate, to — to mark the fact that — that they were still here. That they had made it through the first part of winter. That they were going to make it through the rest.

The old man organized it. He organized it the way he organized everything — quietly, efficiently, with a kind of patient authority that nobody questioned because questioning it would have been more work than just doing what he said. He assigned tasks. He assigned roles. He assigned — he assigned Shirase and me the job of — of decorating the temple.

"Decorating," I said.

"Decorating," he said.

"With what?"

"With whatever you can find. Paper. Branches. Pine cones. Whatever. Make it look — make it look like a festival. Make it look like something. We need — we need it to look like something."

I looked at Shirase. Shirase looked at me. We did not know how to decorate a temple. We did not know how to decorate anything. We were — we were a warehouse worker and a high school student. We were not decorators.

But we were stubborn.

We spent two days on it. We went into the woods and we cut pine branches and we carried them back through the snow and we arranged them around the temple entrance. We found paper — old newspaper, old magazines, the backs of old forms from the village office — and we cut it into shapes. We cut the shapes into — into moons. Into stars. Into — into the things we thought a festival should have. We hung them from the ceiling of the temple with string. We hung them from the branches of the pine. We — we made it look like something.

It looked like something.

It looked like — it looked like a festival. A small one. A poor one. A festival made of pine branches and newspaper moons and string. But it looked like a festival. It looked like a thing that — that people had made, that — that people had cared about, that — that people had decided was worth making.

The old man came to inspect it on the evening of the festival. He

walked through the temple. He looked at the pine branches. He looked at the newspaper moons. He looked at the string. He looked at us.

"It's good," he said.

It was the first compliment he had ever given us.

I almost cried. I did not cry. I was — I was past crying at compliments, by then. I had cried too much in December. I was done crying. I was — I was going to be stubborn. I was going to be the person who did not cry at compliments. I was going to be the person who just — just nodded.

I nodded. Shirase nodded.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me. You did the work. Now go get dressed. The festival starts in an hour."

We went. We got dressed. We — we dressed in our best clothes. Our best clothes were not very good. Our best clothes were the clothes we had been wearing for three months, the clothes that were — were worn, that were — were patched, that were — were clean but not new. Our best clothes were — were what we had.

I put on — I put on the jirai kei. The black lace, the pink ribbons, the platform boots. The — the jirai kei that I had worn on the day we left Niigata, the jirai kei that was — was mine, the jirai kei that was — was the one thing that was entirely mine. I put it on. It was — it was more worn than it had been. The lace was frayed. The ribbons were — were not as pink. The boots were — were holding together, barely. But it was — it was mine. It was — it was the jirai kei. I was going to the festival in it.

Shirase put on — Shirase put on the jeans and the hoodie. The same jeans and the same hoodie she had worn every day. The same jeans and the same hoodie that were — were her. She did not have jirai kei. She did not have — have a thing that was hers, in the way the jirai kei was mine. She just had — had herself. She just had — had the stubborn. She just had — had the look. The look that said *I am here and I am not leaving*.

She looked beautiful.

She always looked beautiful. She did not know she looked beautiful. She had never known she looked beautiful. She was — she was the kind of person who — who did not know, who — who could not see it, who — who looked in the mirror and saw — saw the kid who smelled like shochu, saw — saw the eleven jobs, saw — saw the bench. She did not see — see what I saw. She did not see — see the waist-length black hair and the model figure and the face that did not age and the eyes that were — were not nothing anymore, that were — were full, that were — were hers.

She did not see it.

I saw it.

I always saw it.

We went to the festival.

The festival was — the festival was in the temple. The whole village was there. All — all thirty-something of them. The old man. The old woman, Obaa-chan, who was eighty-seven. The farmers. The children — the three children, the four children, the small number of children who were — were the future of the village, who were — were the reason — the

reason for all of it. They were there. They were — they were in the corner, laughing, playing, being — being children, being — being alive, being — being the thing that — that the festival was for.

The temple was warm. The pine branches smelled like — like pine. The newspaper moons hung from the ceiling and swayed in the heat from the stove. The food was — was on a long table along one wall. Rice. Miso. Fish. Pickled vegetables. Sake. The — the best food the village had. The — the food that — that they had saved, that — that they had been saving, for this.

We ate. We drank. We — we sat on the floor of the temple, cross-legged, and we ate, and we drank, and we — we talked. The old man told stories. He told stories about the village, about — about the old days, about — about the festivals he remembered from his childhood, about — about the way the village had been before — before the moon, before — before everything. He told the stories the way old men tell stories — slowly, with — with detail, with — with the kind of patience that — that comes from having told the story before and knowing that the telling was the point.

The children listened. The children listened with — with wide eyes. The children were — were the right age for stories, the — the age where — where stories are — are real, where — where the thing the old man is saying is — is happening, is — is true, is — is the world.

I listened too.

I listened because — because I had not — had not had this. I had not — had not had the old man telling stories. I had not — had not had the

village festival. I had not — had not had the — the thing where — where people gather and — and eat and — and drink and — and tell stories and — and are — are together. I had had the spreadsheet. I had had the — the karaoke box. I had had the — the nothing. I had not had — had this.

This was — this was the thing I had not had.

This was — this was the thing the spreadsheet could not give me.

This was — this was the thing the bunker could not give me.

This was — this was the thing my mother could not give me.

This was — this was the thing Shirase had given me.

Not — not the festival. Not the village. Not — not the temple. Shirase had given me — the thing that led to the festival. Shirase had given me — the bench. The melon pan. The cardigan. The — the year of Tuesdays. The — the being there. The — the being there had led to — to the road, and the road had led to — to Sakae, and Sakae had led to — to the village, and the village had led to — to this. To the festival. To the temple. To the pine branches and the newspaper moons and the old man telling stories and the children listening and the food on the table and the sake in the cups and the being together.

Shirase had given me this.

I looked at her. She was sitting next to me. She was eating rice. She was listening to the old man. She was — she was here. She was — she was here, with me, in the temple, in the village, in the mountains, in the snow, under the moon that had stopped. She was here.

She felt me looking. She turned. She looked at me.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing."

"You're staring."

"I'm not staring."

"You are. You're staring at me. Stop it. People will think you're in love with me."

"I am in love with you."

"Shut up."

"I am."

"Shut up and eat your rice."

I ate my rice. I did not stop looking at her. She did not stop being — being there. She did not stop being — being hers. She did not stop being — being mine.

The old man finished his stories. The food was eaten. The sake was drunk. The children were getting tired. The — the evening was — was winding down. The — the festival was — was ending.

Then the old man stood up.

The old man stood up and he said — he said *we have one more thing. We have — we have a gift. For the village. For the midwinter.*

He looked at Shirase.

He said *Shirase. Tell them.*

I looked at Shirase. Shirase looked at me. Shirase looked at the old man. Shirase — Shirase did not know what he was talking about.

Then — then she understood.

She had told the old man, the day before, about the radio. About the streamer. About Sapporo. About the moon. She had told him, privately, because — because she did not want to — to get hopes up, did not want to — to say something that — that might not be true. She had told him. And — and he had decided — he had decided that — that the village needed to hear it. That — that the village needed — needed this. That — that this was the gift. That — that this was the thing the midwinter festival was for.

Shirase stood up.

She told them.

She told them about the radio. About the dial. About the — the two in the morning, the earbuds, the static. About the voice. About — about Sapporo. About the streamer. About the — the moon.

She told them the moon had stopped.

The temple was silent.

The — the village was — was silent. The — the thirty-something people, the — the farmers, the — the children, the — the old woman, the — the old man, the — the all of them. They were — were silent. They were — were looking at — at Shirase. They were — were listening.

They were listening the way — the way the children had listened to the old man's stories. With — with wide eyes. With — with the kind of attention that — that comes from — from needing to — to hear. From — from needing it to — to be true.

Shirase told them.

She told them everything. She told them about the broadcast. She told them about the streamer's voice. She told them about what he had said — about Sapporo, about the moon, about the — the stopping. She told them. She — she did not — did not soften it. She — she did not — did not qualify it. She — she did not — did not say *maybe* or *I think* or *it might not be true*. She — she said it. She — she said it the way she said everything — flat, stubborn, certain. The moon had stopped. Sapporo was okay. The streamer was alive. The world was still there.

The temple was silent.

Then — then the old woman, Obaa-chan, the — the eighty-seven-year-old woman who — who had been watching the moon from — from her porch since — since the beginning, the — the woman who — who had first noticed — noticed the stopping — the old woman said — said *I knew it. I knew it. I've been watching. I knew it.*

And — and the temple — the temple broke. The — the silence broke. The — the people — the people were — were talking, were — were crying, were — were laughing, were — were — were alive. The — the village was — was alive. The — the festival was — was alive. The — the midwinter was — was — was the — the moment when — when the dark stopped — stopped getting longer and — and started getting shorter. And — and the

— the moon had stopped. And — and the — the nothing had stopped. And — and the — the everything was — was — was going to — to be — be okay.

The village was alive.

The village was — was going to be okay.

We were going to be okay.

I looked at Shirase. She was standing in the middle of the temple, with the — the pine branches and the — the newspaper moons and the — the thirty-something people who — who were — were alive because — because of what she had said. She was — she was standing there, and — and she was — was looking at — at me. She was — was looking at — at me with — with the — the look. The — the stubborn look. The — the look that said *I am here and I am not leaving.*

I looked at her.

She looked at me.

The temple was full of — of people, of — of sound, of — of life. The — the newspaper moons swayed — swayed on their string. The — the pine branches smelled — smelled like pine. The — the stove was — was hot. The — the sake was — was warm. The — the children were — were running — running around, laughing, not — not understanding, not — not needing to understand, just — just feeling — feeling the — the alive.

The moon was outside.

The moon was — was still. The moon was — was not moving. The moon was — was where it was, and — and it was going to — to stay where

it was, and — and we were — were going to — to stay where we were, and — and everything was — was going to — to be — be okay.

Everything was going to be okay.

I knew it.

Shirase knew it.

The village knew it.

The moon knew it.

Everything was going to be okay.

Chapter 16.95 — The Call

(Akari)

In January, the radio picked up Nagoya.

Not the streamer. Not Sapporo. Nagoya. A — a government broadcast. A — a weak, scratchy, barely-audible government broadcast, on the 31-meter band, at 8 PM on a Saturday. I was turning the dial — it was my turn; Shirase and I had started taking turns, because I had insisted, because I had noticed that Shirase was staying up every Tuesday and I had told her that was not acceptable and she had told me it was and I had told her it was not and she had said *fine*, *we'll take turns* and I had said *good* and that had been that — I was turning the dial on a Saturday evening and I heard it.

A woman's voice. Official. The kind of voice that — that had been trained to sound calm and authoritative, the kind of voice that — that governments use when — when they need people to — to listen.

"—government of Japan, broadcasting from Nagoya. The following is an official announcement. The lunar orbital anomaly, which began in — has stabilized. The moon has entered a new orbital configuration. The moon is not approaching Earth. The moon is not — the moon is not going to — the moon is stable. Repeat: the moon is stable. The government is — the government is establishing communication networks. We are — we are broadcasting on multiple bands. If you are receiving this message, please — please contact the nearest government relay station. The nearest relay stations are: Nagoya, Sapporo, Sendai, Hiroshima, Fukuoka. Contact information will follow. The government is — the government is

requesting that all survivors — all survivors — report their location, their numbers, their needs. The government is — the government is here. We are — we are still here. We are — we are going to — to rebuild. We are — we are going to — to be okay. Please — please stay alive. Please — please keep going. We are — we are here."

The broadcast repeated. I sat there. I sat there on the floor of the Tanaka house with the earbuds in and the radio in my lap and I listened to it three times. I wrote down the contact information — the frequencies, the call signs, the — the things they said to — to use to — to contact them. I wrote it down on the back of a — of a rice label, because that was the paper I had.

Then I went and got Shirase.

Shirase was in the — the other room. She was reading. She was — she was reading *Bloom Into You* for the — the hundredth time, the — the volume we had carried from Niigata, the — the volume that was — was worn, that was — was falling apart, that — that we had — had read so many times the — the pages were — were soft. She was reading it on the futon, in the — the lamp light.

"Shirase," I said.

She looked up. She saw my face. She — she put the book down.

"What."

"The government. Nagoya. They're broadcasting. They're — they're alive. They're asking survivors to — to contact them. They're — Shirase, they're — they're rebuilding."

She stared at me.

"What?"

"The government is alive. They're in Nagoya. They're broadcasting. They're asking — they're asking us to contact them. They're — they're rebuilding."

She stood up. She came to me. She took the — the rice label from my hand. She read it. She read it twice. She looked at me.

"Akari."

"Yeah."

"This is — this is real?"

"It's real. I heard it. Three times. I wrote it down."

"This is —"

"It's real, Shirase. It's real."

She — she did not — did not say anything. She — she sat down. She — she sat down on the floor next to me, and — and she — she looked at the — the rice label, and — and she — she read it again, and — and her hands — her hands were — were shaking. The — the way they shook when — when she had not slept, except — except she had slept, she — she had been sleeping fine, she — she had been sleeping well for — for weeks. Her hands were shaking because — because of — of this. Because of — of the — the news.

Her hands were shaking.

I put my hand on hers.

"They're alive," I said.

"They're alive."

"The government is alive."

"The government is alive."

"Nagoya is alive."

"Nagoya is alive."

"And the moon —"

"The moon is stable. They said. The moon is — the moon has — has stopped. The moon is — it's — it's not going to —"

"It's not going to hit us."

"It's not going to hit us."

"We're going to be okay."

"We're going to be okay."

She — she did not — did not cry. I — I did not cry either. We — we sat there on the floor, with — with the rice label between us, and — and we did not cry. We — we had — had cried enough. We — we had cried at the — the streamer. We — we had cried at the — the midwinter. We — we had cried at — at everything. We — we were — were past crying. We — we were at the — the place after crying. The — the place where — where you just — just sit. Where — where you just — just hold — hold hands. Where

— where you just — just — just are.

We sat there.

We sat there for a long time.

Then — then Shirase said — said *Akari*.

"Yeah."

"Your mother."

I — I went still.

My mother.

I had not — had not thought about — about my mother in — in weeks. I had — I had been — been thinking about her less and less. The — the nothing — the nothing that — that had — had taken me in — in December — the — the nothing that — that Shirase had — had pulled me — pulled me out of — the — the nothing had — had been — had been about — about my mother. The — the nothing had — had been the — the worry, the — the fear, the — the — the not-knowing. The — the not-knowing whether — whether she was — was alive. The — the not-knowing whether — whether the — the bunker had — had held. The — the not-knowing.

The not-knowing had been the nothing.

Shirase had pulled me out of the nothing.

But — but the not-knowing was — was still there. Underneath. The — the not-knowing was — was still there, and — and Shirase knew. Shirase knew that — that it was — was still there. Shirase knew that — that the —

the news — the — the government broadcast — the — the *they're alive*, *they're rebuilding* — that — that this was — was about — about my mother too.

"Your mother," Shirase said. "She was — she was in Nagoya. The — the government is in Nagoya. She might — she might be there. She might be — she might be alive. You should — you should try to — to contact them. You should try to — to find out."

I — I did not — did not say anything. I — I did not know — know what to — to say. I — I had not — had not let myself — let myself think — think about — about my mother. I — I had not — had not let myself — let myself hope. I — I had been — been too scared. I — I had been — been too — too afraid that — that if I — if I hoped, and — and she was — was dead, the — the hoping would — would kill me.

"Akari," Shirase said. "Try."

"I — I can't."

"You can."

"I — I can't. If — if she's —"

"If she's alive, you'll know. If she's — if she's not, you'll know. Either way, you'll know. The not-knowing is — is worse. The not-knowing is — is the nothing. You told me. You told me the nothing was — was the not-knowing. You told me. In — in December. You told me."

"I — I know."

"So — so know. Try. Contact them. Find out."

"Shirase —"

"I'll do it with you. We'll do it together. We'll — we'll contact them. We'll — we'll ask. We'll find out. Together."

I looked at her. She was — she was looking at me with — with the — the eyes. The — the stubborn eyes. The — the eyes that — that said *I am here and I am not leaving and we are going to do this.*

"Okay," I said.

"Okay."

"Okay. Let's — let's try."

We tried.

We tried the next morning. We — we got up early. We — we set up the radio. We — we found the frequency the broadcast had said. We — we transmitted. We — we did not have — have a transmitter, not — not really. We had the — the hand-crank radio, which — which could receive but — but could not transmit. We — we did not have — have a transmitter.

But — but the — the old man — the old man had a — a ham radio. An — an old ham radio, from — from before, from — from when he had been — been a ham radio operator, in — in his youth, in — in the — the days before — before the internet, before — before cell phones. He had — had kept it. In — in his shed. He had — had not used it in — in years. But — but he had — had kept it.

We went to him. We told him. He — he looked at us. He — he looked at the — the rice label. He — he looked at us again.

"Come with me," he said.

We went to his shed. The — the shed was — was behind his house. It was — was full of — of things. Old things. Things he had kept. Things he had — had not thrown away. The — the ham radio was — was in the corner, under a — a tarp, covered in — in dust.

He pulled the tarp off. He blew the dust off. He looked at it.

"Hasn't been used in fifteen years," he said. "Might not work."

"Can you fix it?" I said.

"I can try."

He tried. He spent — spent two days on it. He — he cleaned it. He — he replaced the — the parts that — that had — had corroded. He — he wired it to — to a — a battery — a battery we had, a — a car battery the village had, that — that we kept charged with — with a — a small solar panel. He wired it. He — he got it working.

On the third day, we transmitted.

I did the talking. Shirase was next to me. The old man was at the radio, adjusting the — the frequency, the — the — the things. I — I held the — the microphone. I — I held it in my hand. My hand was shaking. I — I held it.

I said — I said *this is Sakai Akari. I am in Sakae, Niigata Prefecture. I am — I am a survivor. I am — I am trying to contact — I am trying to find information about — about my mother. Sakai Reiko. She was — she was a lawyer. She was in Niigata before the — the crisis. She had — she had a bunker in Nagano. I — I*

am trying to find out if — if she is alive. If — if anyone has any information. Please. This is Sakai Akari. I am in Sakae, Niigata. Please.

I said it three times.

Static.

Static.

Static.

I — I sat there. Shirase — Shirase had her hand on — on my shoulder. The — the old man — the old man was at — at the dials. I — I sat there, and — and I waited. I — I waited for — for a — a voice. For — for a — a response. For — for anything.

Static.

I — I waited.

Static.

I — I waited.

Static.

I — I waited for — for an hour. I — I waited. The — the old man — the old man waited. Shirase — Shirase waited. We — we waited.

Static.

Then — then a voice.

A — a woman's voice. Not — not the — the government woman. A — a different voice. A — a real voice. A — a voice that — that sounded like —

like a person. The voice said — the voice said *Sakai Akari. This is — this is Mori Takashi. I was — I was a partner at — at your mother's firm. Your mother — your mother is alive. She is — she is in Nagoya. She is — she is at the — the government relay station. She has been — has been looking for you. She has been — has been broadcasting your name for — for weeks. She is — she is alive. She is — she is okay. She wants — she wants you to know — she wants you to know she loves you. She is — she is alive.*

I — I did not — did not hear the — the rest. I — I did not — did not hear anything. I — I — the — the world went — went white. The — the world went — went — went to the — the place where — where there is — there is no — no sound, no — no color, no — no anything. The — the world went to the — the place that — that is — is not the nothing, that — that is — is the — the everything. The — the everything that — that is — is too much. The — the everything that — that is — is too big. The — the everything that — that you — you cannot — cannot hold.

My mother was alive.

My mother was alive.

My mother was — was in Nagoya. My mother was — was at the — the government relay station. My mother had been — had been looking for me. My mother had been — had been broadcasting my name. My mother wanted — wanted me to know — wanted me to know she loved me.

My mother loved me.

My mother loved me.

I — I had not — had not known. I — I had not — had not — had not let

myself — let myself know. I — I had not — had not let myself — let myself believe. I — I had not — had not — had not.

But — but she did.

She did.

She loved me.

She had been looking for me.

She had been broadcasting my name.

She loved me.

I — I fell. I — I fell off the — the chair. I — I fell to the — the floor. I — I — Shirase — Shirase caught me. She — she caught me. She — she held me. She — she held me on the floor of the — the shed, in — in the dust, with — with the ham radio and — and the old man and — and the static and — and the voice that — that had said — had said *your mother is alive, she loves you.*

Shirase held me.

I cried.

I cried the — the way I had — had not — had not cried in — in — in ever. I — I cried the — the way you cry when — when the — the thing you — you did not — did not let yourself — let yourself hope for — hope for turns out — turns out to — to be — be true. I — I cried. I — I cried for — for my mother. I — I cried for — for the spreadsheet. I — I cried for — for the bunker. I — I cried for — for the — the not-knowing. I — I cried for — for the — the nothing. I — I cried for — for all of it.

Shirase held me.

She held me through all of it.

She did not — did not let go.

She — she held me, and — and I — I cried, and — and the — the old man — the old man sat at the — the radio and — and pretended to — to adjust the dials, and — and did not — did not look at — at us, and — and gave us — gave us the — the privacy, and — and the — the dignity, of — of not — not looking.

I cried.

Then I stopped.

Then I sat up. Shirase — Shirase was next to me, on the floor. She was — she was looking at me. She was — she was crying too. Not — not the way I was — was crying. Just — just the — the tears. Just — just the — the wet eyes.

"She's alive," I said.

"She's alive."

"My mother is alive."

"Your mother is alive."

"She loves me."

"She loves you."

"She — she was looking for me."

"She was looking for you."

"She loves me."

"She loves you. She always loved you. The — the spreadsheet was love. The — the bunker was love. The — the — all of it was love. She — she didn't — she didn't know how to — to say it. She — she didn't know how to — to show it. But — but it was love. It was always love. And — and now she's — now she's telling you. She's — she's broadcasting it. On the — the radio. To — to all of — of Japan. She — she loves you."

"She loves me."

"She loves you."

I — I looked at — at Shirase. She — she was looking at — at me. She was — she was crying. She was — she was smiling. The — the small smile. The — the smile I — I had — had fallen in — in love with. The — the smile I — I was — was going to — to see for — for the rest of — of my life.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me."

"Thank you. For — for making me — making me try. For — for being here. For — for — for all of it."

"Don't thank me. That's — that's what I'm for. That's — I told you. In the — the spring. I'm for being here. With you. For being the person who — who makes you try."

"You're the person who makes me try."

"Yeah."

"You're the person who makes me everything."

"Shut up."

"You are."

"Shut up and — and let's — let's respond. Let's — let's tell them — tell them we're here. Tell them we're alive. Tell them — tell them — tell them we're coming."

"Coming?"

"To Nagoya. Eventually. When — when the snow melts. When the roads open. We're — we're going to go. We're going to — to see your mother. We're going to — to — to tell her. In person. We're going to go."

"We're going to go."

"We're going to go."

"Okay."

"Okay."

We — we went back to the — the radio. We — we responded. We — we told them — told them we were alive. Told them — told them where we were. Told them — told them we were coming. The — the old man — the old man helped. He — he transmitted. He — he handled the — the technical. We — we just — just talked.

We talked to my mother.

Not — not directly. Not — not yet. The — the connection was — was too weak, too — too scratchy. But — but through Mori-san, through the — the relay, we — we exchanged messages. My mother — my mother said — she said *Akari. I love you. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the spreadsheet. I'm sorry for the bunker. I'm sorry for — for everything. I should have — I should have held you. I should have — I should have been there. I'm sorry. I love you. Please — please come. Please come to Nagoya. Please — please let me see you. Please.*

I said — I said *Mom. I love you too. I'm — I'm okay. I'm — I'm in Sakae. I'm — I'm with someone. She's — she's — she's my — she's my person. She's — she's the one who — who kept me alive. She's — I'm — I'm coming. When the snow melts. I'm coming. I'll — I'll bring her. I want — I want you to meet her. I — I love you. I'll — I'll come.*

We transmitted.

We received.

We — we were going to go.

We were going to go to Nagoya.

When the snow melted.

When the roads opened.

We were going to go see my mother.

And — and I was going to bring Shirase.

And — and my mother was going to meet her.

And — and everything was — was going to be — be okay.

Everything was going to be okay.

The moon was stable.

The government was alive.

My mother was alive.

My mother loved me.

We were going to be okay.

We were going to be okay.

Chapter 16.97 — The Thaw

(Shirase)

The snow began to melt in March.

It did not melt all at once. It melted the way snow melts in the mountains — slowly, reluctantly, in fits and starts. A warm day would strip a foot of snow off the roofs, and a cold night would put it back. The roads — the forestry road, the path to the village — were rivers of mud for weeks. The valley floor, far below, was still white. But the sun was higher. The days were longer. The dark was shorter. The — the nothing was — was retreating.

I had not realized how much the winter had weighed on me until it began to lift.

The weight had been — had been physical. The weight had been on my chest, on my shoulders, on — on the back of my neck. The weight had been the snow, the dark, the cold, the — the being inside, the being trapped, the being — being in the small house with the small fire and the small light and the — the nothing. The weight had been the not-going-outside. The weight had been the not-moving. The weight had been — had been the winter.

The winter was ending.

I stood on the porch of the Tanaka house on the first warm day of March and I felt the sun on my face — the actual sun, the real sun, the sun that had been behind clouds for four months — and I cried. I did not mean to. I just — I just stood there, and the sun was on my face, and the tears

came. They came the way water comes from a tap you have turned off for a long time — rusty at first, then clear. They came, and I let them, and I did not wipe them, and I stood on the porch with the sun on my face and the tears on my cheeks and I was — I was okay. I was going to be okay. The winter was ending, and I was going to be okay.

Akari found me there. She had been in the fields — the fields were still mostly snow, but the snow was retreating, and she had been out checking the soil, checking what was underneath, checking what was going to be plantable when the ground finally thawed. She came up the path with mud on her boots and a look on her face that said she had been thinking hard about something, and she stopped when she saw me.

"Shirase?"

"I'm fine."

"You're crying."

"I'm fine. The sun came out."

She looked at me. She looked at the sun. She looked at me again. She understood. She — she understood the way she always understood, without me having to explain. She came up the steps. She stood next to me. She put her arm around my waist. She leaned her head against my shoulder. We stood there, on the porch, in the sun, and we did not say anything. We did not need to. The sun was enough. The standing was enough. The being together was enough.

The thaw continued.

The village came alive the way a body comes alive after anesthesia —

slowly, painfully, one part at a time. First the old man, who had been moving all winter, who had never stopped moving, who was — was the most stubborn person in the village besides me. Then the farmers, who began — began to think about the fields, about the — the planting, about — about what they were going to grow, about — about whether the soil was — was still good, about — about whether the moon had — had changed anything, about — about all the things that farmers think about. Then the children, who had been — had been inside for months, who — who burst out of — of their houses like — like water from a dam, who ran through the mud and the snow and the — the half-melted everything, who — who were alive, who — who had been alive all winter, who — who were now — now more alive, because the outside was back.

The village was alive.

The village had made it.

We had made it.

We had made it through the winter.

We had made it through the dark, through the snow, through the nothing, through the — the everything. We had made it. We were here. We were alive. The moon was stable. The government was alive. Akari's mother was alive. The streamer was alive. The world was — was still there. The world was broken, badly, but it was still there, and it was — it was going to — to keep being there, and we were going to keep being there with it.

We had made it.

I stood on the porch and I felt the sun and I thought about — about the year ahead. About the planting. About the growing. About the harvest. About the — the things that — that were going to happen, the — the things that — that we were going to do. About the trip to Nagoya. About seeing Akari's mother. About — about all of it. About the future.

I had not thought about the future in a long time.

I had not — had not let myself think about the future. The future had been — had been a luxury I could not afford. The future had been — had been the thing that — that the moon was going to take from me. The future had been — had been the thing I had decided not to think about, because thinking about it would — would hurt, because thinking about it would — would make me hope, and hoping would — would make me weak.

But the moon had stopped.

The moon had stopped, and the future was — was back. The future was — was a thing I could think about. The future was — was a thing I could have. The future was — was a thing that — that was going to happen, that — that I was going to be there for, that — that I was going to — to live.

I was going to live.

I was going to live, and Akari was going to live, and the village was going to live, and the world was going to live, and — and the future was — was ours.

The future was ours.

I — I had never had a future before. I had had — had a present. I had had — had a now. I had had — had the next thing — the next job, the next meal, the next manga cafe. I had not — had not had a future. I had not — had not thought I was — was going to have one. I had — had thought I was — was going to die, on the bench, at twenty-two, with — with nothing.

But I had not died.

I had not died because Akari had sat down.

I had not died because Akari had given me her cardigan.

I had not died because Akari had come back.

And now — now I had a future. I had — I had a future with — with Akari, in — in the Tanaka house, in — in the village, in — in the mountains, under — under the moon that had stopped. I had — I had a future. I had — I had the planting, and the growing, and the harvest, and the winter, and the spring, and the summer, and the fall, and the — the years. I had the years. I had — I had the years with — with her.

I had the years.

I was going to — to use them.

I was going to — to use them stubbornly.

I was going to — to use them well.

Chapter 16.99 — Tendo Returns

(Shirase)

Tendo came back in April.

He came alone. He came on foot. He came up the forestry road, the same road we had come up six months ago, the same road the cult had come up the day of the fight. He came alone. He was not wearing the white robe. He was wearing — he was wearing clothes. Normal clothes. A jacket. Pants. Boots. He was wearing the kind of clothes a person wears when they are walking a long way and when they are not trying to be anything other than a person walking a long way.

The lookouts saw him. They came and got me. I was in the fields with Akari, turning the soil for the spring planting — the first planting, the first year, the — the beginning of the agricultural year in Sakae. I was — I was dirty. I had mud on my hands and mud on my knees and mud on my face. I was holding a hoe. I was not — not armed. I had not been armed since the winter. I had not — had not carried the knife since the — the fight. I had put the knife away. I had thought — I had thought we were done with that.

The lookout said *there's a man on the road. One man. He's alone. He's — he says his name is Tendo.*

I went still.

Akari went still next to me. She had heard. She — she looked at me. I — I looked at her.

"Shirase," she said.

"I know."

"What do we do?"

"I don't know."

"Should we —"

"I don't know. Let me — let me think."

I thought. I stood in the field with the hoe in my hand and the mud on my knees and I thought. I thought about Tendo. I thought about the white robes. I thought about the chanting. I thought about the fight. I thought about the — the blue eyes, the — the smile that did not reach the eyes. I thought about the — the last time I had seen him, walking down the road with his four remaining followers, not chanting, not looking back. I thought about what he had said. *I don't know how to stop.*

He had stopped.

Or — or he was going to try to stop. Or — or he was pretending to have stopped. Or — or he was coming back to — to try again. I did not know. I could not know. I could only — only find out.

"I'm going to talk to him," I said.

"Shirase —"

"I'm going to talk to him. Alone. At the gate. The — the old man's there. The lookouts are there. I'm not going to be — I'm not going to be alone alone. I'm going to be — I'm going to be safe. But I'm going to talk to

him. I want to — I want to hear what he has to say."

"What if it's a trap?"

"Then the lookouts will — will handle it. But I don't think it's a trap. I think — I think he's alone. I think he's — I think he's done. I think — I think he doesn't know how to stop, and he's — and he's coming to — to ask. To ask how."

"How to stop?"

"How to stop. How to — how to be a person again. How to — how to not be — be the thing he became."

"You're — you're giving him a lot of credit."

"I'm — I'm being stubborn. I'm being the person who — who told him *you can come in*, *you can put down the robes*, *you can eat with us*, *you can be a person again*. I told him that. I meant it. I have to — I have to mean it now."

Akari looked at me for a long time. She — she did not like it. I could see that she did not like it. I could see that she wanted to — to argue, to — to tell me not to go, to — to tell me to send the old man instead, to — to tell me anything other than *go*. But — but she did not. She — she looked at me, and — and she — she saw the — the stubborn. The — the stubborn that — that she knew, that — that she had been living with for — for two years, that — that she had — had fallen in — in love with. She saw the stubborn, and — and she — she nodded.

"Okay," she said. "Go. I'll — I'll be here. If — if anything —"

"Nothing's going to happen."

"If — if anything. I'll be here."

"Okay."

I went.

I went to the gate. The — the gate was — was just a place, really, the — the edge of the village, where the — the forestry road came in. The — the old man was there. Two — two other farmers. They had — had tools. They had — had the — the rifles. They were — were ready. They were — were watching the road.

Tendo was standing at the edge of the road. Fifty meters away. He was — he was standing there the way a person stands when they are not sure they are welcome. He was — he was not — not coming closer. He was — he was waiting. He was — he was waiting to be — to be invited.

I walked out to him.

The old man said *Shirase* — and I said *I'm fine. Stay here.* And I walked out to him. I walked the fifty meters. I walked slowly. I did not — did not carry anything. I had put the hoe down. I was — I was just — just a person, walking, in the mud, toward another person.

I stopped five meters from him.

I looked at him.

He looked at me.

He was — he was different. He was — he was thinner. He was — he

was — the blue eyes were — were not — not the same. The — the calm was — was gone. The — the certainty was — was gone. The — the smile that did not reach the eyes was — was gone. He was — he was just — a man. A tired man. A man who had — had walked a long way. A man who had — had been something and was — was not that thing anymore and did not know what to — what to be now.

"Sister," he said.

"I'm not your sister."

"I know. I'm — I'm sorry. I don't know what to — what to call you."

"Shirase is fine."

"Shirase."

"Yeah."

"I — I came back."

"I see that."

"I — I came back because — because you said I could."

"I said you could. Six months ago. I said — I said you could come in. You could put down the robes. You could eat with us. You could be a person again."

"I remember."

"And?"

"And I — I couldn't. Then. I — I couldn't. I — I didn't know how. I — I

went away. I — I walked. I — I walked for — for months. I — I went south. I — I went to Nagoya. I — I saw — I saw the — the city. The — the broken city. The — the people, the — the — the suffering. I — I saw it. I — I had not — had not seen it before. I — I had been — been in the mountains. I — I had been — been with the — the Children. I — I had not — had not seen — seen the — the — the real. The — the — the what-was-happening. I saw it. In Nagoya. I saw it."

"And?"

"And I — I stopped. I — I stopped being — being the thing I had become. I — I didn't — I didn't know how. I — I just — I just stopped. I — I put down the robe. I — I put down the — the certainty. I — I — I was — I was nothing. For — for a while. I — I was — I was just — just a man. Just — just Tendo. Just — just a person who had — had been something terrible and — and didn't know what to — what to be now."

"And?"

"And I — I thought about you. I — I thought about — about what you said. About — about coming in. About — about eating. About — about being a person. I — I thought about it for — for months. I — I walked back. I — I walked all the way back. I — I came here. I — I came here because — because you said I could. And — and I — I don't — I don't have anywhere else to — to go."

I looked at him. I looked at him for a long time. He — he stood there. He — he did not — did not move. He — he did not — did not — did not try to — to convince me. He — he did not — did not — did not promise anything. He — he just — just stood there. And — and he was — was — he

was — he was honest. He was — he was — he was — for the first time since I had met him — he was honest.

"You can come in," I said.

He — he did not — did not react. He — he just — just looked at me.

"You can come in," I said again. "You can eat with us. You can work. You can — you can be a person. But — but you have to — you have to be a person. You have to — you have to not be the — the thing you were. You have to — you have to not — not recruit. Not — not preach. Not — not tell people about the moon. You have to — you have to just — just be — be Tendo. Just — just a person. Can you do that?"

"I — I can try."

"Trying is not enough. You have to do it."

"I — I don't know if I can."

"Nobody knows if they can. You do it anyway. That's — that's what being a person is. You do it anyway."

"I — I —"

"Can you do it?"

He — he looked at me. He — he looked at me for a long time. Then — then he said — he said *yes*.

"Okay," I said. "Come in."

I turned around. I walked back toward the village. He — he followed. He — he followed five meters behind me, the way — the way you follow

someone you are not sure you are welcome to follow. I walked. He followed. We — we came to the gate. The — the old man — the old man was there. The — the farmers. They — they saw Tendo. They — they saw me. They — they saw — saw the thing that was happening. They — they did not — did not say anything. They — they watched. They — they were ready. But — but they — they let us through.

I brought Tendo to the temple.

I brought him to the temple because — because the temple was the — the place where the village met. The — the temple was the — the place where the festival had been. The — the temple was the — the center. I brought him there. I — I sat him down. I — I went to the kitchen. I — I made him tea. I — I made him rice. I — I made him miso. I — I brought it to him. I — I put it in front of him.

"Eat," I said.

He — he looked at the food. He — he looked at me. He — he picked up the chopsticks. He — he ate. He — he ate slowly. He — he ate the way Shirase had eaten, on the bench, the — the way a person eats when — when they have — have not eaten in — in a long time. He ate. He — he ate all of it. He — he put down the chopsticks. He — he looked at me.

"Thank you," he said.

"Don't thank me. Just — just be a person."

"I — I'll try."

"Don't try. Do it."

"I — I'll do it."

"Okay."

"Okay."

He — he stayed. The — the village — the village did not — did not like it. The — the village did not — did not trust him. The — the village — the village had — had fought him. The — the village had — had almost died because of him. The — the village did not — did not want — want him there. But — but I — I had — had said he could stay. And — and the village — the village trusted me. The — the village — the village had — had decided, somewhere along the line, that — that I was — was the person who — who decided things. The — the village had — had decided that — that if I said Tendo could stay, then — then Tendo could stay.

He stayed.

He was — he was not — not good at it, at — at first. He was — was not good at being a person. He had — had been the — the elder brother of the Children of the Perigee for — for too long. He had — had been — been the — the leader, the — the certain one, the — the one who — who knew. He did not — did not know how to — to not know. He did not — did not know how to — to be uncertain. He did not — did not know how to — to be — be wrong.

But — but he learned.

He learned because — because the village did not — did not let him — let him be the — the certain one. The — the village did not — did not let him — let him lead. The — the village — the village just — just treated him

like — like a person. Like — like a person who — who had to — to work, who — who had to — to eat, who — who had to — to sleep, who — who had to — to be — be there. The — the village treated him like — like a person, and — and he — he learned. Slowly. Painfully. The — the way I had learned, in — in the year of Tuesdays. The — the way Akari had taught me. The — the way Akari had — had been — been patient, had — had been impatient about being patient, had — had been — been there. The — the village was — was patient with Tendo, the — the way Akari had been patient with me.

He learned.

He — he learned to — to work. He — he learned to — to carry things. He — he learned to — to chop wood. He — he learned to — to plant. He — he learned to — to harvest. He — he learned the — the things that — that the village knew, the — the things that — that I was — was learning too. He — he learned alongside me. We — we worked in the — the same fields. We — we carried the — the same loads. We — we did not — did not talk much. We — we just — just worked. Side by side. In the mud. In the sun. Under the — the moon that had stopped.

He — he was not — was not the — the same. He was — was never going to be the — the same. The — the blue eyes were — were still blue. The — the calm was — was — was back, sometimes, but — but it was — was a different calm. It was — was the calm of — of a person who had — had been — been broken and — and had — had put themselves — put themselves back together, and — and the putting-together was — was visible, was — was — was the — the cracks in the — the calm. But — but it was — was a real calm. It was — was a calm that — that had been — been

earned.

He — he was a person.

He was — was a person who had — had been something terrible and — and had — had stopped and — and had — had learned to — to be — be something else. Not — not good. Not — not redeemed. Not — not forgiven. Just — just — just a person. Just — just Tendo. Just — just a man, in a village, in the mountains, under the moon, learning to — to be — be there.

I tell you about Tendo because — because Tendo is — is the — the proof. Tendo is — is the proof that — that the — the stubborn works. That — that the — the *you can come in, you can put down the robes, you can be a person again* — that that — that that is not — not just words. That — that that is — is — is real. That — that you can — can say it and — and mean it and — and the person can — can come in and — and put down the robes and — and be a person. That — that it works. That — that stubborn works. That — that love works. That — that the — the being-there works.

Tendo is the proof.

Tendo is — is the proof that — that the — the apocalypse did not — did not win. That — that the — the moon did not — did not win. That — that the — the nothing did not — did not win. That — that the — the cult did not — did not win. That — that we — we won. That — that stubborn, patient, being-there love — won. That — that the — the kind of love that — that says *you can come in* — won. That — that the — the kind of love that — that Akari had — had shown me, on the bench, with the melon pan — won.

We won.

We won because — because we were stubborn.

We won because — because we did not — did not give up.

We won because — because we did not — did not stop being — being people.

We won.

Tendo is the proof.

Tendo is — is the proof that — that you can — can come back from — from the nothing. That — that you can — can stop being — being the terrible thing. That — that you can — can be — be a person. That — that it is — is possible. That — that it works.

Tendo is — is the proof.

And — and I — I am — am the proof too.

And — and Akari — Akari is — is the proof too.

And — and the — the village — the village is — is the proof.

We are — are all the proof.

We are — are all the proof that — that stubborn works.

We are — are all the proof that — that love works.

We are — are all the proof that — that being there works.

We are — are all the proof.

And — and the — the moon — the moon is — is the proof that — that even the — the big things — the — the huge, terrible, falling things — even those things can — can stop. Can — can be — be stopped. Can — can — can — can settle. Can — can find a — a new — a new place. Can — can — can just — just be — be there, in — in the sky, not — not falling, not — not ending, just — just being.

The moon is the proof.

We are the proof.

Everything is the proof.

Everything is going to be okay.

Everything is going to be okay because — because we are — are stubborn. Because — because we are — are here. Because — because we are — are not — not leaving. Because — because we are — are going to — to keep — keep being — being here. For — for as long as — as we are — are alive. And — and we are — are going to — to be — be alive for — for a long time.

Because — because we are stubborn.

Because — because we are the proof.

Chapter 16 — Perigee

(Third Person)

The moon reached perigee on a Tuesday.

Nobody knew it was perigee at the time. Nobody was measuring. The observatories were closed. The government was in Nagoya, and the government had stopped making announcements. The radio, when it worked at all, was a chaos of local stations relaying local news — a bridge out here, a food shipment there, a missing person, a birth, a death. There was no national news anymore. There was no moon news. There was just — the moon.

The moon, on that Tuesday, was at its closest.

It was — it is hard to describe how close. The moon was — the moon filled the sky. The moon was not a disc anymore. The moon was a wall. The moon was — the moon was the sky. The horizon was a thin band of grey at the edges, and the rest was moon. The craters were — the craters were lakes. The seas were — the seas were oceans. The terminator was a coastline. The moon was so close that you could see — you could see texture. You could see — you could see the way the light moved across the surface, the slow creep of dawn on the lunar far side, the way the craters threw shadows that moved, hour by hour, as the moon rotated in its too-fast orbit.

The moon was — the moon was right there.

The tidal forces were — the tidal forces were catastrophic. The oceans had risen. The coasts were gone. The rivers had become lakes. The lakes

had become seas. The whole geography of Japan had been rewritten in three months, the coastline pushed inward by fifty kilometers in places, the plains flooded, the cities — the cities were gone. Tokyo was a bay. Osaka was a bay. Nagoya was — Nagoya was still there, barely, on higher ground, but it was the last city standing, and it was not standing well.

The earthquakes were constant. Not the big ones — the big ones had stopped, somehow, in the last week, as if the crust had finished adjusting to the new tidal regime. But the small ones, the aftershocks, the steady low rumble of a planet being squeezed — those were constant. The ground never stopped moving. You got used to it. You learned to walk like a sailor on a deck.

The people of Sakae were — they were alive. They had been alive for three months since the cult. They had planted. They had harvested. They had fixed the roof of the temple and the roof of the school and the roof of the Tanaka house. They had — they had survived. They had done the thing that Shirase had told them to do, which was: keep being a village.

Shirase and Akari were — they were together.

They had been together for three months. They had been together in the way that two people are together when they have decided to be together and when the world has stopped trying to talk them out of it. They slept in the same futon. They ate from the same bowl. They argued about the same things — the state of the kitchen, the proper way to hang laundry, whether Shirase was allowed to play video games on her phone during the apocalypse (yes, because she had found an emulator that worked offline and because Akari had lost that particular argument), whether Akari was allowed to spend three hours on her nails when there

were crops to weed (yes, because the nails were hers and because Shirase had lost that particular argument). They — they lived. They lived together, in the small dead man's house, in the village, on the mountain, under the moon.

They were alive.

They were alive, and they were in love, and they were — they were stubborn.

The moon reached perigee on a Tuesday.

Nobody knew it was perigee. But everybody knew something was happening. The moon had been getting closer for three months. The moon had been getting closer faster and faster. The moon had been — the moon had been accelerating. And then, on Tuesday, the moon stopped.

The moon stopped getting closer.

It did not start getting further. It just — it stopped. The moon hung in the sky, at the closest point it had reached, and it did not move. Not closer. Not further. It just — stopped.

The first person to notice was an old woman in the village, Obaa-chan, who was eighty-seven years old and who had been watching the moon every night from her porch since the crisis began. She noticed on Tuesday evening, when the moon rose at the same time it had risen on Monday, in the same place, with the same apparent diameter. She mentioned it to her neighbor. Her neighbor mentioned it to the old man. The old man mentioned it to Shirase.

Shirase went to the radio. She listened. The local stations were — the

local stations were chaotic, but there was a thread, in the chaos, of people noticing the same thing. *The moon has stopped. The moon is not getting closer. The moon is not getting further. The moon has stopped.*

Shirase went to the temple. She gathered the village. She told them.

The village did not believe her. Not at first. They had been — they had been preparing to die. They had been preparing to die for three months. They had — they had been alive, yes, but they had been alive in the way that people are alive when they expect to stop being alive soon. They had been — they had been holding on. They had been stubborn. They had been — they had been waiting for the end.

Now the end was — maybe not coming.

The village did not know what to do with this.

Shirase knew what to do with this.

"Keep being a village," she said.

They looked at her.

"The moon has stopped. We don't know why. We don't know if it's going to start again. We don't know if it's going to get closer. We don't know if it's going to break apart. We don't know anything. But we know what to do. We keep being a village. We keep planting. We keep harvesting. We keep fixing roofs. We keep — we keep being alive. We keep being a village. That's what we do. That's — that's the only thing we know how to do. So we do it."

The village looked at her. The village looked at the moon. The village

looked at each other.

The village went back to being a village.

The moon did not move.

Wednesday. Thursday. Friday. The moon did not move. The tides — the tides were still high. The tides were — the tides were going to be high for a long time, because the moon was still close, even if it was not getting closer. But the tides did not get higher. The earthquakes did not get worse. The world — the world did not get more broken. The world was — the world was broken, badly, but it was not getting more broken.

The world was — the world was stable.

For the first time in three months, the world was stable.

Shirase did not trust it. She did not trust it for a long time. She — she watched the moon. She watched it every night. She measured it, with a stick and a string, the way the old astronomers had done. She wrote the measurements down. She — she waited for it to start moving again.

It did not start moving again.

A week passed. Two weeks. A month.

The moon did not move.

The radio, in the second month, started picking up stations from further away. Nagoya. Hiroshima. Sapporo. The stations were — the stations were full of people who had survived. The stations were full of — of confusion, and grief, and — and hope. The stations were full of people who had noticed the same thing. The moon had stopped. The moon was

— the moon was just there. Huge. Close. Constant. But not moving.

Nobody knew why.

Theories came and went. The tidal forces had reached equilibrium. The moon had hit a resonance and locked. An alien intelligence had stopped it. God had stopped it. The cultists had been right, in a way — the moon had come home, and now it was home, and home was where it stayed.

Nobody knew.

It did not matter.

What mattered was: the world was stable. The world was — the world was broken, but it was stable. The world was going to keep being a world. The world was — the world was going to be there tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. The world was — the world was not ending.

The world was not ending.

It had been ending for three months. It had been ending, and now it was not ending. It was — it was just there. Broken. Hurting. Grieving. But there.

Shirase told Akari on a Tuesday, three months after perigee.

They were on the porch of the Tanaka house. It was evening. The moon was overhead, huge and silver and constant. Akari was leaning against Shirase's shoulder. Shirase had her arm around Akari. They had been — they had been doing this for months. They had been — they had been together, in the small ways, in the daily ways, in the way you are

together when you have decided to be together and the world has stopped trying to talk you out of it.

"Akari," Shirase said.

"Mm."

"The moon's not moving."

"I know."

"It hasn't moved in three months."

"I know."

"We're — we're going to be okay."

Akari did not say anything for a long time. She was — she was very still. She was — she was thinking. She was — she was feeling something, and the feeling was big, and she did not have a word for it.

"Shirase," she said.

"Yeah."

"I've known that for a year and a half."

"What?"

"That we're going to be okay. I've known that since the bench. Since the melon pan. Since — since you. I've — I've known that we were going to be okay since you. The moon was — the moon was a — a detail. A — a large detail. But a detail. We were going to be okay. We were always going to be okay. Because — because I had you. Because I was going to

have you. Because — because we're us. And we're stubborn. And we don't — we don't stop."

Shirase did not say anything. She — she held Akari tighter. She — she closed her eyes.

"I love you," Akari said.

"I love you too."

"I'm going to love you until we're old."

"You're going to love me until we're old."

"Yes."

"Even though I leave dishes in the sink."

"Even though you leave dishes in the sink."

"Even though I make loud slapping noises with my hands."

"Even though you make loud slapping noises with your hands. Although — although if you do it at 3 AM one more time I'm going to smother you with a pillow."

"Fair."

"Fair."

They sat there. The moon hung overhead. The village was quiet around them. Somewhere, in the distance, a dog barked. Somewhere, closer, a baby cried, briefly, and was comforted. Somewhere, in the temple, the old man was pouring himself a cup of sake, the way he did

every evening, the way he had done every evening since the cult.

The world was broken.

The world was — the world was going to keep being a world.

Shirase and Akari were alive. They were together. They were in love. They were — they were going to be old, together, in a small house in a village in the mountains, under a moon that was too close and too big and too constant and that was — that was just there now, just a fact, just a thing in the sky that you got used to, the way you got used to mountains, the way you got used to rivers, the way you got used to the shape of your own life.

They were going to be okay.

They had always been going to be okay.

They just — they just hadn't known it, until now.

Chapter 17.1 — The Question

(Shirase)

I asked her in May.

Not — not the way they ask in manga. Not — not the way they ask in anime. Not — not with a ring, not — not on a knee, not — not in a — a dramatic location at — at sunset. I asked her in the kitchen. In — in the Tanaka house. In — in the morning. With — with tea. I asked her the way I asked her everything — badly, awkwardly, with — with the wrong words, in — in the wrong order, at — at the wrong time.

I had been thinking about it for — for weeks. Since — since the thaw. Since — since Tendo. Since — since the radio, since — since the — the news that — that the moon had stopped, that — that the government was alive, that — that Akari's mother was alive. Since — since the future came back. I had been — had been thinking about — about the future. About — about what the future looked like. About — about what I wanted the future to look like. And — and what I wanted — what I wanted was — was Akari. Not — not just — just for now. Not — not just — just for the — the crisis. Not — not just — just until — until the — the next thing. For — for always. For — for the — the whole — the whole future. For — for the — the rest of — of my life.

I wanted to marry her.

I did not — did not know how to — to ask. I did not — did not know the — the words. I did not — did not know the — the form. I — I was not — was not a person who — who knew how to — to ask for things. I was —

was a person who — who was — was given things, who — who was — was — was shown up for, who — who was — was — was fed, who — who was — was — was taken care of. I was — was not — was not a person who — who asked. I — I was — was the person who — who was — was there. I was — was not — was not the person who — who said — said *will you — will you — will you marry me*.

But — but I wanted to — to say it. I — I wanted to — to ask. I — I wanted to — to be the one who — who asked, for — for once. I — I wanted to — to not be — be the one who — who was — was always — always receiving. I — I wanted to — to give. I — I wanted to — to give her — give her this. Give her the — the question. Give her the — the — the *will you*.

I did not have a ring. I did not — did not have money for a ring. We did not — did not have money for — for anything. We were — were farmers. We were — were — were alive, and — and we had — had food, and — and we had — had a house, and — and we had — had each other, and — and we had — had the village. But — but we did not — did not have money. We did not — did not have rings. We did not — did not have the — the things that — that people were supposed to — to have when — when they — they asked.

I did not let that stop me.

I was stubborn.

I was going to — to ask. Without a ring. Without the — the form. Without the — the right words. I was — was going to — to ask, because — because asking was — was the thing. Asking was — was the — the point. Asking was — was the — the *will you*. The — the *will you* was — was the

ring. The — the *will you* was — was the form. The — the *will you* was — was — was the — the everything.

I asked her on a Tuesday.

It was a Tuesday because — because Tuesdays were ours. Tuesdays were — were the day Akari came home early. Tuesdays were — were the day we — we had together, just — just us, the — the day we — we watched the — the streamer, the — the day we — we were — were the — the two of us. Tuesdays were — were the day I — I had — had the — the best chance of — of — of saying it, of — of — of not — not — not chickening out, of — of — of being — being stubborn enough.

I got up early. I made tea. I made — I made rice. I made — I made miso. I made — I made breakfast. I — I did the things Akari usually did. I — I did them badly. The rice was — was a little burnt. The miso was — was a little too salty. The — the eggs — I had tried to make tamagoyaki, the way Akari made it, and — and it had — had not worked, it — it was — was more like — like scrambled eggs, in — in a — a rolled shape. It was — it was not good. But — but it was — was there. I had — had made it. I had — had tried.

Akari came out of the bedroom. She — she saw the — the breakfast. She — she saw me, standing in the kitchen, with — with the tea, with — with the — the burnt rice, with — with the — the failed tamagoyaki. She — she stopped. She — she looked at me.

"Shirase," she said.

"Good morning."

"Did you — did you make breakfast?"

"Yeah."

"You made breakfast."

"Yeah."

"You — you don't make breakfast. You — you don't cook. You — you burn water."

"I — I cooked. I — I made rice. I made miso. I made — I tried to make tamagoyaki."

She — she came over. She — she looked at the — the tamagoyaki. She — she poked it. She — she looked at me. She — she almost laughed. She — she did laugh. A — a small laugh. The — the first laugh of — of the morning.

"Shirase," she said. "This is — this is the sweetest thing you've ever done. And — and the worst tamagoyaki I've ever seen."

"Shut up. Sit down. Eat."

She sat down. She — she ate. She — she ate the burnt rice. She — she ate the too-salty miso. She — she ate the — the failed tamagoyaki. She — she ate all of it. She — she did not complain. She — she just — just ate. The — the way I ate, when — when she had — had made me food, in — in the year of — of Tuesdays. She — she ate the way you eat when — when someone you love has — has made you something, and — and the something is — is bad, but — but the — the making is — is the thing.

She ate.

Then — then she was done. She — she put down her chopsticks. She — she looked at me.

"Shirase," she said. "That was — that was terrible."

"I know."

"But — but thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Why — why did you —"

"Akari."

"Yeah."

"I — I want to — to ask you — to ask you something."

She — she looked at me. She — she went — she went still. The — the way she went still when — when she was — was paying attention, when — when she knew — knew something — something important was — was happening.

"What?" she said.

"I — I don't — I don't know how to — to say this. I — I've been — been thinking about it for — for weeks. I — I don't have — I don't have a ring. I — I don't have — I don't have the — the words. I — I don't have — I don't have anything. I — I just have — have me. I — I just have — have the — the question. And — and I — I — I want to — to ask it. Even though — even though I — I don't — don't know how. Even though — even though I — I don't — don't have the — the form. I — I want to — to ask."

"Shirase —"

"Will you — will you marry me?"

The kitchen was silent.

The — the kitchen was — was silent the way the — the temple had been — been silent, when — when I had told the — the village about the — the moon. The — the silence of — of — of a thing being — being — being too big for — for sound. The — the silence of — of a moment that — that — that — that is — is — is the — the moment.

Akari looked at me.

She — she did not — did not say anything. For — for a long time. She — she just — just looked at me. She — she looked at me with — with the — the eyes. The — the eyes I had — had seen on — on the — the bench. The — the eyes I had — had seen in — in the — the shrine. The — the eyes I had — had seen in — in the — the week. The — the eyes that — that were — were — were the — the *oh* eyes. The — the eyes that — that were — were — were the — the everything.

She — she opened her mouth. She — she closed it. She — she opened it again.

"Shirase," she said.

"Yeah."

"You — you absolute idiot."

"What?"

"You — you absolute — you — you don't have a ring. You — you don't have the — the words. You — you made me — you made me the worst tamagoyaki I've ever eaten. You — you — you asked me in — in the — the kitchen, at — at breakfast, with — with burnt rice. You — you — you —"

"Akari —"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes, I'll — I'll marry you. Yes. Of course. Yes. You — you idiot. You — you — of course. Yes."

She was crying. She was — was laughing. She was — was crying and — and laughing. She was — was — was — was the — the most beautiful thing I had — had ever seen. She was — was — was — was there, in — in the — the kitchen, in — in the morning, with — with the — the burnt rice and — and the — the failed tamagoyaki, and — and she was — was — was — was saying yes.

She was saying yes.

I — I did not — did not know what to — to do. I — I had — had not — had not planned for — for the yes. I — I had — had planned for — for the — the asking. I — I had — had not — had not planned for — for the — the — the answer. I — I just — just stood there. I — I stood there, in — in the kitchen, with — with the — the tea, and — and I — I did not — did not know what to — to do.

Akari knew what to do.

Akari — Akari stood up. Akari — Akari came around the — the table. Akari — Akari put her — her arms around — around me. Akari — Akari kissed me. Akari — Akari kissed me the way she kissed me when — when she meant it, the — the way she kissed me when — when she was — was not — not holding back, the — the way she kissed me when — when she was — was — was saying — saying everything, all — all at once, in — in the — the kiss.

She kissed me.

I kissed her back.

We stood there, in the kitchen, in the morning, with the burnt rice and the failed tamagoyaki and the tea, and we kissed, and we held each other, and we did not let go, and we were — we were engaged. We were — we were going to — to get married. We were — we were going to — to be — be married. We were — we were going to — to spend the — the rest of — of our lives — lives together. We were — we were — we were — we were going to — to be — be the — the old — the old women, in — in the — the small house, in — in the village, under — under the — the moon, who — who had been — been together for — for — for decades, who — who had — had been — been married for — for decades, who — who — who were — were still — still there.

We were going to be that.

We were going to be that because — because Akari had said yes.

We were going to be that because — because I had asked.

We were going to be that because — because we were stubborn.

We were going to be that.

We were going to be that.

We were going to be that.

"Shirase," Akari said, against my mouth.

"Yeah."

"We're getting married."

"Yeah."

"I'm going to — I'm going to plan the whole thing. I'm — I'm going to — to make it — make it perfect. I'm — I'm going to — to —"

"You're going to make a spreadsheet."

She — she pulled back. She — she looked at me. She — she almost — almost hit me. She — she did hit me. A — a small slap, on — on the shoulder. The — the slapping sound. The — the sound I made, when — when I was — was concentrating. She had — had picked it up from me. She had — had been doing it for — for months. She — she slapped me on the shoulder, and — and the sound was — was loud, and — and I — I laughed, and — and she — she laughed, and — and we — we were — were — were — were engaged.

We were engaged.

I had asked.

She had said yes.

We were engaged.

In the kitchen.

With the burnt rice.

And the failed tamagoyaki.

And the tea.

And the morning.

And the — the rest of — of our lives.

Chapter 17.2 — The Ceremony

(Akari)

The wedding was in August.

Not the August of the Niigata Festival — that August was gone, that Niigata was gone, that festival was a memory. This was a different August. This was the August of the second year after perigee. This was the August when the moon had been stable for ten months, when the government had re-established contact with most of Honshu, when the trains were running again — not all of them, not all the way, but some of them, enough of them, the — the skeleton of a rail network reconnecting the skeleton of a country.

This was the August when my mother came to Sakae.

She came on the train. The train came from Nagoya, through the — the broken landscape, through the — the flooded coastlines, through the — the parts of Japan that were — were gone and the parts that were — were coming back. The train came to Nagaoka, and from Nagaoka my mother took a car — one of the few cars, one of the government cars, one of the cars that ran on the rationed gas — and the car came up the mountain road, the forestry road, the road that Shirase and I had walked, and the car came to Sakae.

I had not seen my mother in two years.

I had talked to her. On the radio. Through the relays. Through the — the scratchy, barely-audible messages that — that we had exchanged, week by week, month by month, since January. I had talked to her. I had

— had told her about Shirase. I had told her about the village. I had told her about the — the wedding. I had — had told her.

But I had not seen her.

She got out of the car. She — she stood at the — the edge of the village, at the — the place where the forestry road met the village, at the — the gate. She stood there. She — she was — she was different. She was — thinner. She was — older. She was — her hair was — was grey, greyer than it had been, grey in a way that — that I had not — had not expected, grey in a way that — that two years of — of apocalypse and — and worry and — and looking for me had — had done to her. She was — she was different.

But she was my mother.

She was my mother, and she was there, and she was alive, and she was — she was looking at me.

I was standing at the gate. Shirase was next to me. The — the whole village was — was behind us. The — the old man. Obaa-chan. The — the farmers. The — the children. Tendo. The — the everyone. They were — were behind us. They were — were there. For — for me. For — for us.

I looked at my mother.

My mother looked at me.

I — I did not move. I — I could not — could not move. I — I had been — been strong for — for two years. I — I had been — been stubborn. I — I had been — been the person who — who kept — kept going, who — who did not — did not — did not break. I — I had been — been that person. And

now — now my mother was — was there, and — and I was — was not — not that person anymore. I was — was just — just a girl, a — a girl who — who had not — had not seen her — her mother in — in two years, a — a girl who — who wanted — wanted her — her mother.

I ran.

I — I ran. I — I broke from — from Shirase's side. I — I ran across the — the fifty meters. I — I ran to — to my mother. I — I — she — she opened her — her arms. I — I fell into — into them. I — I — she — she held me. She — she held me the way — the way she had — had not — had not held me — me in — in — in ever. She — she held me the way — the way the — the mothers in — in the karaoke box had — had held their daughters. She — she held me the way — the way I had — had wanted — wanted her to — to hold me — me for — for — for my whole life.

She held me.

I cried.

I cried the — the way I had — had not — had not cried in — in a — a long time. I — I cried into — into her shoulder. I — I cried the — the way you cry when — when the — the thing you — you did not — did not know you — you needed — needed turns out — turns out to — to be — be there. I — I cried.

She cried too.

We — we stood there, at the — the gate, in — in front of — of the — the whole village, and — and we cried, and — and we held — held each other, and — and we did not — did not care — care who — who saw.

"Akari," she said.

"Mom."

"Akari. My — my baby."

"Mom."

"I'm — I'm sorry. I'm — I'm so sorry. For — for the spreadsheet. For — for the bunker. For — for — for everything. I'm — I'm sorry."

"I — I know. Mom. I — I know. It's — it's okay. It's — it's okay. I — I love you. I — I love you. It's — it's okay."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"I — I should have — should have held you. I — I should have — should have been there. I — I should have —"

"It's — it's okay, Mom. It's — it's okay. You're — you're here now. You're — you're here. That's — that's what — what matters. You're — you're here."

"I'm here."

"You're here."

We — we held each other. For — for a long time. The — the village — the village watched. The — the village did not — did not say anything. The — the village gave us — gave us the — the moment. The — the village was — was good at — at that. At — at giving moments. At — at being there without — without — without intruding.

Then — then Shirase came.

Shirase — Shirase walked across the — the fifty meters. She — she walked slowly. She — she was — was scared. I — I could see it. I — I could see the — the fear in — in her face, the — the fear of — of meeting my — my mother, the — the fear of — of the — the mother of — of the person she — she loved, the — the fear that — that my mother would — would not — not approve, would — would not — not accept, would — would not — not — not want — want her.

She came.

She stopped. A few meters away. She — she looked at — at my mother. She — she looked at — at me. She — she said — she said *Sakai-san. I'm — I'm Fukuoka Shirase. I'm — I'm — I'm the — the person who — who —*

He couldn't finish.

My mother — my mother let go of me. My mother — my mother stepped forward. My mother — my mother looked at — at Shirase. She — she looked at her for — for a long time. She — she looked at the — the black hair, the — the young face, the — the small hands, the — the — the everything. She — she looked.

Then — then my mother — my mother did a thing I — I did not — did not expect.

My mother bowed.

My mother — my mother, the — the partner at — at the law firm, the — the woman who — who had — had never — never bowed to — to anyone, the — the woman who — who was — was too proud to — to bow — my

mother bowed to — to Shirase. She — she bowed deep. She — she bowed the way you bow to — to someone you — you owe — owe something to. She — she bowed.

"Fukuoka-san," she said. "Thank you. Thank you for — for keeping my daughter alive. Thank you for — for being there. Thank you for — for — for loving her. I — I cannot — I cannot repay — I cannot — I — thank you."

Shirase — Shirase did not — did not know what to — to do. She — she had — had not — had not expected a — a bow. She — she had not — had not expected — expected gratitude. She — she had — had expected — expected judgment. She — she had — had expected — expected the — the — the look, the — the *you're twenty-two and my daughter is seventeen and what — what are — are you.* She — she had — had not — had not expected a — a bow.

She — she bowed back. She — she bowed back deep, the — the way you bow when — when someone has — has bowed to — to you and — and you do not — do not know what — what else to — to do. She — she bowed.

Then — then my mother — my mother straightened. She — she looked at — at Shirase. She — she — she almost smiled. Almost. The — the almost-smile of — of a woman who — who had — had not — had not smiled in — in a long time and — and was — was remembering how.

"Call me Reiko," she said.

The wedding was the next day.

The wedding was in the temple. The — the whole village was there.

The — the old man presided. He — he was not a — a priest, not — not officially, but — but he was the — the oldest person in — in the village, and — and the village had — had decided, a long time ago, that — that the oldest person was — was the person who — who presided. He — he presided.

I wore white. I — I had told you I would. I — I wore a — a yukata, white, that — that the village seamstress had — had made for me. The — the yukata was — was simple. The — the yukata was — was not a — a wedding dress. The — the yukata was — was a — a yukata. But — but it was — was white. And — and it was — was mine. And — and it was — was — was the — the thing I — I was — was going to — to wear, when — when I — I married — married Shirase.

Shirase wore a suit. The — the suit Akari — I — I had bought for her, on — on a trip to — to Nagoya, the — the year before. The — the suit did not — did not fit very well. I — I had said — I had said it fit perfectly. I — I had been — been lying. The — the suit was — was too big in — in the shoulders and — and too long in — in the sleeves. But — but Shirase wore it. And — and she looked — she looked beautiful. She — she always looked beautiful. She — she did not — did not know it. She — she would — would never — never know it. But — but she — she was.

We stood in front of the — the old man. We — we stood side by side. We — we held hands. In — in front of — of everyone. In — in front of — of the — the whole village. In — in front of — of my mother. In — in front of — of the — the moon.

The moon was there. The — the moon was — was always there. The — the moon was — was huge and — and silver and — and stable, in — in the

sky, over — over the mountains, over — over the temple. The — the moon was — was there. The — the moon was — was — was the — the witness. The — the moon was — was the — the thing that — that had — had tried to — to take — take everything from — from us, and — and had — had not — not — not — not won. The — the moon was — was there, and — and we — we were — were there, and — and we — we were — were getting — getting married, and — and the — the moon was — was — was not — not going to — to stop — stop us.

The old man spoke.

He spoke the — the words. The — the words he had — had decided on, the — the words he had — had written, the — the words that — that were — were not — not the — the traditional words, not — not the — the Shinto words, not — not the — the — the any words. The — the words were — were his. The — the words were — were the — the village's. The — the words were — were ours.

He said — he said *we are here. We are here, under the moon, under the sun, under the sky. We are here, and we are alive. We are here, and these two — these two women — these two women who have — who have walked through — through the dark, through the snow, through the flood, through the — the everything — these two women are — are here, and — and they want to — to be — be together. They want to — to promise. They want to — to say — to say to each other, and — and to us, and — and to the — the moon, that — that they are — are going to — to be — be together. For — for as long as — as they are — are alive. And — and we — we are — are here to — to witness. We — we are — are here to — to say — to say that — that we — we see — see them. That — that we — we know — know them. That — that we — we are — are — are*

glad. That — that they — they are — are — are here. That — that they — they are — are — are together. That — that they — they are — are — are going to — to be — be together. And — and we — we are — are — are glad.

He said it. The — the words were — were simple. The — the words were — were not — not fancy. The — the words were — were just — just true. The — the words were — were the — the truest thing I — I had — had ever heard.

Then — then he said — he said *say — say your — your vows.*

I had written mine. I — I had written them in — in the notebook, the — the way I — I wrote everything. I — I had written them and — and rewritten them and — and — and I had — had them in — in my pocket, on — on a piece of — of paper. I — I pulled the — the paper out. I — I held it. My — my hands were — were shaking.

I looked at Shirase. She — she was looking at me. She — she did not have — have a piece of — of paper. She — she had not — had not written anything down. She — she was — was just — just going to — to say it. The — the way she said everything. The — the flat, stubborn way.

I went first.

I said — I said *Shirase. I — I wrote this down because — because I — I knew I — I would — would forget. I — I — I wrote it down because — because I — I wanted to — to get it — get it right. I — I —*

I — I stopped. I — I looked at — at the paper. I — I could not — could not read it. The — the words were — were there, on — on the paper, but — but I — I could not — could not read them. They — they were not — not

the — the right words. They — they were the — the words I — I had — had written, in — in the — the notebook, and — and they were — were good words, but — but they were — were not — not the — the words I — I wanted to — to say. Not — not now. Not — not here. Not — not in — in front of — of — of everyone.

I put the paper down.

I said — I said *Shirase. I — I was seventeen when I — I met you. I — I was — I was dying. I — I did not — did not know I — I was dying, but — but I — I was. I — I was — was dying the way — the way you were dying, on — on the bench. The — the nothing. The — the — the fine. I — I was — was fine, and — and I — I was dying, and — and nobody — nobody could — could tell the — the difference. And — and then — then I — I sat down. On — on the bench. Next to — to you. And — and you — you looked at me, and — and you — you had the — the nothing eyes, and — and I — I had the — the nothing eyes, and — and I — I — I gave you my — my cardigan. And — and that — that was — was the — the beginning. That — that was — was the — the — the first thing. The — the cardigan. The — the melon pan. The — the coming back. The — the — the year of — of Tuesdays. The — the spring. The — the tamagoyaki. The — the — the being there. All — all of it. All — all of it led — led here. To — to this. To — to the — the temple. To — to the — the village. To — to the — the moon. To — to — to you. To — to — to us. I — I — I promise — I promise to — to be — be here. To — to be — be the — the person who — who comes back. To — to be — be the — the person who — who is — is there. To — to be — be the — the person who — who — who holds — holds you. To — to be — be the — the person who — who pulls — pulls you back, from — from the — the nothing, every — every time. I — I promise. For — for as long as — as I — I am — am alive. And — and I — I am — am going to — to be — be alive for — for a long time. Because — because I — I*

am — am stubborn. Because — because I — I — I learned — learned from — from you. I — I love you. I — I love you. I — I — I will — will love you. For — for as long as — as the — the moon. For — for longer than — than the — the moon. I — I love you.

I stopped.

I was crying. The — the village was — was crying. My mother was — was crying. The — the old man was — was crying. The — the children did not — did not understand, but — but they were — were quiet, because — because the — the adults were — were crying and — and the — the air was — was the — the kind of — of air that — that — that you — you are — are quiet in.

Shirase was — was looking at me. She — she was crying too. The — the quiet kind. The — the tears. The — the wet eyes. She — she was looking at me with — with the — the eyes. The — the stubborn eyes. The — the *I am here and I am not leaving* eyes.

She said — she said *Akari. I — I don't have — don't have a piece of — of paper. I — I don't have — don't have words. I — I never — never have words. You — you know that. I — I — I just have — have me. I — I just have — have the — the stubborn. I — I just have — have the — the being here. I — I — I promise — I promise to — to be — be here. To — to be — be the — the person who — who is — is there. To — to be — be the — the person who — who does not — does not leave. To — to be — be the — the person who — who — who makes you — makes you try. I — I — I promise. For — for as long as — as I — I am — am alive. And — and I — I am — am going to — to be — be alive for — for a long time. Because — because I — I am — am the — the most stubborn person you — you have — have ever met. Including — including your — your mother. I — I*

love you. I — I — I have — have loved you since — since the — the bench. Since — since the — the melon pan. Since — since the — the first morning you — you came — came back. I — I — I will — will love you. For — for as long as — as the — the moon. For — for longer than — than the — the moon. I — I love you.

She stopped.

The — the temple was — was silent. The — the village was — was silent. The — the moon was — was — was there, through the — the window, huge and — and silver and — and still.

The — the old man — the old man said — he said *then — then be — be together. Be — be married. Be — be the — the two who — who are — are — are one. Be — be here. Be — be alive. Be — be stubborn. Be — be — be.*

He said it.

We kissed.

We kissed in front of — of everyone. In front of — of the — the village. In front of — of my mother. In front of — of the — the moon. We — we kissed, and — and the — the village cheered, and — and the children ran around, and — and Obaa-chan clapped, and — and the old man poured sake, and — and we were — were married.

We were married.

We were — were married, under the — the moon, in — in the temple, in — in the village, in — in the mountains. We — we were — were married, and — and the — the moon was — was there, and — and we — we were — were there, and — and nothing — nothing was — was falling, and — and nothing — nothing was — was ending, and — and everything — everything

was — was beginning.

Everything was beginning.

We were married.

We were married.

We were married.

Chapter 17.3 — Nagoya

(Akari)

We went to Nagoya in September.

The train was running again. Not the Shinkansen — the Shinkansen was gone, the Shinkansen was one of the things the moon had taken, the elevated tracks buckled by earthquakes, the stations flooded, the whole system a casualty. But the regular trains were running. The old trains, the local trains, the ones that went through every station and took forever. They were running. From Nagaoka to Nagoya, with a change at Takasaki, with a change at Tokyo — Tokyo, which was not gone, which was smaller, which was damaged, but which was there. The trains were running. We could go.

My mother had come to Sakae for the wedding. She had stayed for a week. She had — she had met Shirase. She had — she had bowed to Shirase. She had — she had said *call me Reiko*. She had — she had been kind. She had — she had been the mother I had always wanted, the mother she had never known how to be, the mother that — that the apocalypse and — and the bunker and — and the looking for me had — had cracked open. She had been that mother. For a week. And then she had gone back to Nagoya, and she had said *come. Come see me. Come see where I am. Come see what we're building.*

We went.

The train ride was two days. Two days, with an overnight in Tokyo, in a — a government guesthouse, one of the buildings they had set up for —

for travelers, for — for the people who were — were moving again, who were — were going places, who were — were not just — just surviving but — but living. The guesthouse was small. The guesthouse was — was not the Tokyo I had known, the Tokyo of — of hotels and — and restaurants and — and the — the life I had — had been supposed to — to have, on the spreadsheet. The guesthouse was — was a room with two futons and a shared bathroom and a — a breakfast of rice and miso in the morning. The guesthouse was — was fine. The guesthouse was — was enough.

Shirase had never been to Tokyo.

She had been to Tokyo, actually. She had lived in Tokyo. For four years. When she was sixteen to twenty. The — the eleven jobs. The — the manga cafes. The — the — the four years of — of misery. She had been to Tokyo. But — but she had not been back. She had not been back since — since she had left, since — since she had gone to Niigata, since — since the — the friend in — in Sapporo and — and the couch and — and the apartment. She had not been back.

She was scared.

She did not say she was scared. She — she said she was fine. She — she said she was okay. She — she said *it's just a city, Akari, I've been to cities.* But — but her hands were shaking. The — the way they shook when — when she had not slept, except — except she had slept, she — she had been sleeping fine. Her hands were shaking because — because Tokyo.

I held her hand on the train.

I held her hand from Nagaoka to Takasaki. I held her hand from Takasaki to Tokyo. I held her hand on the — the platform at Tokyo Station,

which was — was damaged, which was — was half-repaired, which was — was not the Tokyo Station I had — had known, but — but which was — was there. I held her hand. She — she did not — did not pull away. She — she held back. She — she held my hand the way — the way I had held hers, on — on the — the stream crossing, the — the day of — of the flood. She — she held on.

We walked through Tokyo.

Tokyo was — Tokyo was broken. Tokyo was — was the city the moon had — had almost taken. Tokyo was — was the flooded parts, the — the collapsed parts, the — the parts that were — were gone. But — but Tokyo was also — also the parts that were — were there. The — the parts that had — had held. The — the parts that were — were being — being rebuilt. The — the parts where people were — were living, were — were working, were — were — were alive.

We walked through Tokyo and Shirase was quiet. She was — she was looking at everything. She was — she was looking at the — the broken and the — the rebuilt and the — the everything. She was — she was looking for — for the Tokyo she had known. The — the Tokyo of — of the eleven jobs. The — the Tokyo of — of the manga cafes and — and the convenience stores and — and the — the four years.

She did not find it.

The Tokyo she had known was gone. The — the manga cafes were — were gone. The — the convenience stores were — were different. The — the buildings were — were different. The — the — the everything was — was different. The Tokyo she had — had suffered in, the Tokyo she had —

had survived in, the Tokyo she had — had — had lived in — that Tokyo was gone.

She cried.

She cried on a street corner in Shinjuku, standing in the rain — it was raining, it was September, it was — it was raining — she cried on a street corner, and I held her, and she cried, and she said *it's gone. It's all gone. The — the bookstore. The — the bakery. The — the — the everything. It's gone. I — I didn't — I didn't think I — I would — I would miss it. I — I hated it here. I — I — I was — I was miserable here. But — but it was — it was mine. It was — it was my — my misery. My — my — my place. And — and it's gone.*

I held her.

I held her the way she had held me. I — I held her on the street corner, in the rain, in — in the — the broken city, and — and I did not — did not say anything, because — because there was nothing to say, because — because the city was gone and — and the misery was gone and — and the place was gone, and — and all I could do was — was be there. Be there, the way she had been there for me. Be there, the way — the way the person who loves you is there. Be there.

We went to Nagoya the next day.

Nagoya was different from Tokyo. Nagoya was — was less broken. Nagoya had — had been further from the coast, had — had been on higher ground, had — had been — been luckier. Nagoya was — was the city the government had — had chosen, the — the city that was — was becoming the — the new capital, the — the center. Nagoya was — was full of — of people, full of — of energy, full of — of the — the things that — that a city

has when — when it is — is alive. Nagoya was — was alive.

My mother met us at the station.

She met us at the station and she — she hugged me, again, the way she had hugged me at the gate, and — and she hugged Shirase, which — which surprised me, which — which surprised Shirase, which — which was — was the — the second time my mother had — had touched Shirase, the first being the — the bow. She — she hugged Shirase. She — she hugged her the way — the way you hug the person who — who saved your daughter's life. She — she hugged her.

"Welcome," she said. "Welcome to — to my home. Welcome to — to Nagoya. Welcome."

We stayed with my mother for a week.

My mother's apartment was — was not the apartment I had grown up in. The apartment I had grown up in was in Niigata, and — and the Niigata apartment was — was gone, was — was underwater, was — was one of the things the moon had taken. My mother's apartment was — was a government-assigned apartment in Nagoya, small, functional, the — the kind of apartment they gave to — to government workers, to — to the people who were — were rebuilding. It was — was two bedrooms and a kitchen and a bathroom. It was — was small. It was — was not the apartment on the spreadsheet.

But — but it was — was home.

It was home because — because my mother was there. It was home because — because my mother had made it home. She had — had put

things on the walls. She had — had put a small plant on the windowsill. She had — had put a photograph on the — the table — a photograph of me, of — of me at sixteen, of — of me before — before the — the hair, before — before the — the jirai kei, before — before everything. She had put the photograph there. She had — had been looking at it. She had — had been looking at it for — for two years.

She showed us around. She showed us the apartment. She showed us the kitchen — the small kitchen, the — the kitchen where she now — now cooked, the — the kitchen where she had — had learned to cook, the — the kitchen where she made — made rice and — and miso and — and the — the things she had never — never made before, because — because before, she had — had been at the office, and — and the kitchen had been — been mine. Now — now the kitchen was hers. She had — had learned. She had — had changed.

She had changed.

My mother had changed. The — the woman who had — had made the spreadsheet, the — the woman who had — had built the bunker, the — the woman who had — had been — been cold, been — been planning, been — been — been the — the mother I had — had not wanted to — to be — that woman was — was — was not gone. But — but she was — was different. She was — was softer. She was — was — was there. She was — was the mother who had — had hugged me at the gate. She was — was the mother who had — had bowed to — to Shirase. She was — was the mother who had — had been — been looking for me, who had — had been broadcasting my name, who had — had been — been — been there, in the — the way she had — had not been — been there before.

She was there.

She was there the way Shirase was there. She was there the way — the way I had wanted her to be there, when I was — was fourteen, when I was — was dying, when I was — was — was reading *Bloom Into You* under my mattress with a flashlight. She was there the way — the way I had — had needed her to — to be there, and — and she had not been, and — and now she was. Now she was there. Now — now it was — was too late for — for some things, for — for the childhood, for — for the — the years, but — but it was not — not too late for — for the rest. For — for the now. For — for the future.

She was there.

She showed us Nagoya. She showed us the — the government buildings. She showed us the — the relay station, the — the place where she worked, the — the place where she had — had broadcast my name. She showed us the — the markets, the — the new markets, the — the markets that were — were springing up, the — the markets where people were — were selling things again, were — were trading, were — were — were living. She showed us the — the city.

Nagoya was alive. Nagoya was — was the city that was — was coming back. Nagoya was — was the proof that — that the — the world was — was coming back. Not — not the same world. Not — not the world before the moon. A — a different world. A — a smaller world. A — a broken world. But — but a world. A — a world that was — was there, that — that was — was — was going to — to keep being there.

We stayed for a week. We ate my mother's cooking. We talked. We —

we talked about the — the things we had not — had not talked about. We talked about the spreadsheet. We talked about the bunker. We talked about the — the — the years. We talked about — about everything. We — we cried. We laughed. We — we were — were a family, the — the kind of — of family I had — had not — had not had, the — the kind of family I had — had wanted, the — the kind of family that — that — that the — the spreadsheet had — had tried to — to be and — and had — had not been.

We were a family.

My mother accepted Shirase. My mother — my mother more than accepted Shirase. My mother — my mother loved Shirase. My mother loved Shirase the way — the way you love the person who — who saved your daughter's life. My mother loved Shirase the way — the way I loved Shirase. Not — not the same way, not — not the — the romantic way, but — but the — the — the way. The — the deep way. The — the real way.

"You're good for her," my mother said to Shirase, on the — the last evening, on the — the balcony, while I was — was inside, washing dishes. "You're — you're the person she — she needed. I — I wasn't — I wasn't that person. I — I couldn't — I couldn't be — be that person. But — but you — you are. You — you are. Thank you."

Shirase — Shirase did not — did not know what to — to say. She — she looked at — at my mother. She — she said — she said *Reiko-san. I — I — I — she's — she's the person who — who saved me. I — I was — I was on a bench. I — I was — was dying. She — she sat down. She — she — she gave me her — her cardigan. She — she came back. She — she — she's the one who — who — who saved me. I — I — I should be — be thanking you. For — for — for her. For — for making — making her. She — she's — she's the — the best person I — I — I have*

— have ever — ever met.

My mother — my mother smiled. A — a real smile. The — the first real smile I had — had seen on — on her face in — in — in ever. She — she smiled.

"She gets it from me," my mother said. And then, after a pause: "The stubborn part, anyway."

Shirase laughed. A — a real laugh. The — the laugh I loved. The — the laugh I had — had fallen in — in love with.

They — they laughed together, on — on the balcony, and — and I — I watched from — from the kitchen, and — and I — I cried. The — the good kind. The — the kind that — that comes from — from the — the — the seeing. From — from the — the — the being — being there. From — from the — the — the — the everything.

We went back to Sakae.

We went back to — to the — the Tanaka house, to — to the — the village, to — to the — the mountains, to — to the — the moon. We — we went back. We — we had been to — to Nagoya, we — we had seen — seen my mother, we — we had — had been — been a — a family, and — and now we — we went — went back. To — to — to the — the place that — that was — was ours. To — to the — the place that — that was — was home.

Home was not Nagoya. Home was not Niigata. Home was not Tokyo. Home was — was the Tanaka house. Home was — was the village. Home was — was the — the place where — where we — we had — had walked,

where — where we — we had — had fought, where — where we — we had — had nearly died, where — where we — we had — had — had — had lived.

Home was — was each other.

Home was — was Shirase.

Home was — was the — the being there.

Home was — was the — the — the being there, together, under — under the — the moon, for — for as long as — as the — the moon, for — for longer than — than the — the moon.

Home.

We were home.

We were home.

Chapter 17.4 — The Streamer

(Shirase)

We made contact with the streamer in October.

Not over the radio — over the mail. The postal service had been coming back, piece by piece, throughout the summer. Letters took two to four weeks to arrive, depending on the route. They were opened, read, sometimes censored, sometimes lost. They got there. Eventually, they got there.

I wrote him a letter because I had been listening to his broadcasts for nine months. Every Tuesday at 2 AM, earbuds in, sitting on the floor of the Tanaka house next to the hand-crank radio. He never knew I was there. He never knew anyone was there. He just talked — about the dungeon, about Sapporo, about the moon, about whatever came into his head. And I listened.

I wrote the letter in the notebook, the way I wrote everything. I wrote it in the neat handwriting Akari had spent two years teaching me, because she had told me, flatly, that my old handwriting looked like a seismograph reading and that if I was going to write to a stranger I should write so the stranger could read it. I wrote the letter. I addressed it to HKB-7, Sapporo, in care of the government relay station, because that was the only address I had.

The letter said:

To HKB-7,

My name is Fukuoka Shirase. I am in Sakae, Niigata Prefecture. I have been listening to your broadcasts since January. Every Tuesday. At 2 AM. With earbuds, because my wife — yes, wife, we got married in August, the village held a ceremony, it's a long story — my wife complains that the radio keeps her awake.

I want you to know that I have been one of your forty-three viewers for two years. I watched you clear the first dungeon on my second monitor in Niigata at 3 AM while I played my own game on the first. I watched you start the new one. I watched you walk into floor seven and die to the floor seven boss forty-seven times, and I want you to know that I laughed at you every single time, because I am a bad person.

I want you to know that your Tuesday broadcasts are the reason I am still alive. Not the only reason. But a reason. Through the winter — we had three meters of snow up here, by the way, I have never been so cold in my life, I grew up in a heated apartment in Niigata and I had no idea what cold was — through the winter, your voice was the proof that the world was still there. That somewhere, in Sapporo, a man was still playing a game. That somewhere, someone was still trying. That was the thing that kept me going, on the nights when I could not sleep and the moon was too big and I wanted to give up.

I cleared Ruinverse. The true ending. The two leads kiss. I won a melon pan off a bet with my wife about it. I am still smug.

Thank you. For broadcasting. For being there. For not stopping.

Fukuoka Shirase Sakae, Niigata October, Year 2 AP

P.S. — Akari says hi. She also says you have bad taste in canned coffee, based on the brand you mentioned in your August 14 broadcast. She is wrong,

but I am not going to tell her that.

I put the letter in the mailbox at the village office. I did not expect a response. I expected the letter to get lost somewhere between Niigata and Sapporo, or to sit in a relay station for six months, or to be eaten by a crow. I did not expect anything.

Three weeks later, a letter came back.

It came in a brown envelope, postmarked Sapporo, with my name on it in handwriting I did not recognize — small, careful, slightly cramped, the handwriting of a person who had not written a letter in years and was remembering how. I opened it on the porch. Akari was in the fields. I was alone.

The letter said:

Shirase,

I got your letter on a Thursday. I read it on the floor of my apartment, next to the radio, three times. Then I cried for about an hour. I am not embarrassed about this. I am forty-one years old and I cried on the floor of my apartment because someone, somewhere, was listening.

I did not know anyone was listening.

I have been broadcasting since February because — I don't know. Because the radio was there. Because the dungeon was there. Because I had to do something with my mouth or I was going to talk to myself, which I had been doing, and which had begun to worry me. So I broadcast. I told myself I was doing it in case someone was out there. I did not believe anyone was out there. I broadcast anyway, because the alternative was silence, and silence

was the thing I could not do.

You were out there.

I want you to know — and I am going to write this carefully because my hands are shaking and I have to keep stopping to wipe my eyes, which is ridiculous, I am forty-one years old — I want you to know that your letter is the reason I am going to clear the new dungeon. I have been on floor fifteen for a month. I had been thinking, this last week, that maybe I would stop. That maybe the dungeon had beaten me. That maybe it was time to just — sit. Be quiet. Stop.

Then your letter came.

I am not going to stop. I am going to clear floor fifteen, and floor sixteen, and whatever else is in there, and I am going to broadcast it on a Tuesday at 2 AM, and you are going to listen, and your wife is going to complain about the radio, and we are going to be — I don't know. We are going to be a thing. The three of us. The broadcaster and the listeners. The dungeon and the two women in the mountains who care.

I am glad you are alive. I am glad your wife is alive. I am glad you are in a village, in the mountains, under the moon, and you are farming, and you are okay. I am glad you won the melon pan. I want you to know that the canned coffee I mentioned on August 14 is, in fact, the best canned coffee in Japan, and your wife is wrong, and you should tell her.

I am going to clear the dungeon.

I will broadcast next Tuesday.

HKB-7 Sapporo November, Year 2 AP

P.S. — Tell your wife that if she is so confident about canned coffee, she should send me a can of whatever she thinks is better, and I will conduct a blind taste test on air. I am serious. Send the coffee.

P.P.S. — I don't know what Ruinverse is. I have never played it. I have spent the last six years playing one dungeon. I am, perhaps, a little out of touch.

I read the letter three times. Then I sat on the porch and laughed — actually laughed, the kind of laugh that comes from the stomach, the kind I had not done in months. I laughed because the streamer was alive, and the streamer was funny, and the streamer was forty-one years old and cried on his floor and was not embarrassed about it, and the streamer wanted us to send him coffee.

Akari came home from the fields to find me on the porch, holding the letter, laughing. She stopped at the foot of the steps. She looked at me.

"Are you okay?" she said.

"I'm great."

"You're laughing."

"I know."

"You don't laugh."

"I know."

"So why are you laughing?"

I handed her the letter. She read it. Her face went through about four expressions — concern, confusion, comprehension, and finally the small

private smile she got when she was trying not to laugh and failing. She handed the letter back.

"He wants me to send him coffee," she said.

"He wants you to send him coffee."

"The coffee I drink is better than the coffee he drinks."

"I told him that."

"You told him that."

"I told him you were wrong but I wasn't going to tell you that."

"You told him I was wrong?"

"I told him you were wrong. About the coffee. I told him you were right about everything else."

"I am right about everything else."

"I know."

"Especially the coffee."

"Shut up."

"Send him the coffee."

"Okay."

"Send him two cans. So he can do the blind test properly."

"Okay."

"And a note. Telling him he's wrong."

"Okay."

"And telling him I'm glad he's alive."

"Okay."

"And telling him — " she stopped. She looked at me. "And telling him thank you."

"Thank you?"

"For keeping you alive. Through the winter. When I couldn't."

"Akari —"

"For keeping you alive. When I was — when I was in the nothing. When I couldn't be the one. He was the one. For those nights. He was the one who kept you going. I want to thank him for that."

I looked at her. She was looking at me with the eyes — the stubborn eyes, the ones that said *I am here and I am not leaving*, but also the other ones, the soft ones, the ones she did not show very often because she was Akari and Akari did not show softness easily.

"Okay," I said. "We'll send him the coffee. And the note."

"Okay."

"Two cans."

"Two cans."

"And a note telling him he's wrong about the coffee but right about

the dungeon."

"Right about everything except the coffee."

"Right about everything except the coffee."

We sent the coffee. Two cans of Akari's preferred brand — UCC Milk Coffee, the one in the blue can, the one she had been drinking since she was fifteen. We wrapped them in newspaper and put them in a box and put the box in the mail. The note, in Akari's neat handwriting, said:

HKB-7,

You are wrong about the coffee. You are right about everything else. Thank you for keeping my wife alive through the winter. I owe you a debt I cannot repay. If you ever come to Niigata, come to Sakae. We will feed you. We will give you a place to sleep. We will let you lose at video games.

Send us your address when you have one. We will send more coffee.

Sakai Akari (the wife) Sakae, Niigata November, Year 2 AP

He wrote back. A short letter, just a few lines, in the same small careful handwriting.

Akari,

I received the coffee. I conducted the blind test. You are right. Your coffee is better. I am not too proud to admit this. I will not admit it on air. Some defeats must remain private.

Thank you for the coffee. Thank you for the wife. (This is a joke. I do not actually want your wife. I am forty-one years old and I live in a radio station

and I have not spoken to a woman in three years and I am, frankly, a lost cause. But thank you for the offer. It is the closest thing to a romantic proposition I have received this decade.)

My address is below. Send more coffee. I will drink it on floor sixteen.

HKB-7

We became pen pals.

We exchanged letters once a month, sometimes more. The three of us — me, Akari, and the streamer. We wrote about everything. We wrote about the dungeon, about the village, about the weather, about the moon. We wrote about the small things — what we had eaten, what we had read, what we had thought about while we were working. We wrote about the big things — the government, the rebuilding, the future. We wrote about nothing in particular and everything in general.

The streamer cleared the new dungeon two years later.

He broadcast the final boss on a Tuesday at 2 AM. I was on the floor of the Tanaka house with the earbuds in. Akari was asleep in the futon. The moon was through the window. The fire was banked. The world was quiet.

I listened to him fight the boss. It took him forty minutes. He did not say anything during the fight. He just played. The sound of the controller, the sound of the game, the sound of his breathing — that was all. Forty minutes of silence, broken only by the small mechanical sounds of a man finishing a thing he had spent six years on.

Then the boss died. The victory music played. And the streamer said,

in a voice that cracked halfway through:

That's it. That's the clear. Six years. Two dungeons. One clear. I want to thank — I want to thank Shirase. In Niigata. Who wrote me a letter, two years ago, and told me she was listening. Who kept me going, when I wanted to stop. This clear is for her. And for her wife. And for everyone who is still here.

I'm going to go make some coffee. The blue can. The good stuff.

Good night.

The broadcast ended.

I sat on the floor with the earbuds in and the radio in my lap and I cried. Quietly, because Akari was asleep. I cried the way I had not cried in a long time — not from grief, not from fear, not from relief. From the thing that comes when someone you have never met, eight hundred kilometers away, finishes a thing they started six years ago, and they say your name on the radio, and they thank you, and you know that you mattered. That you were a reason. That the being-there — the being-there that Akari had taught me, the being-there that had kept me alive — that being-there had kept someone else alive too.

I mattered.

The streamer mattered.

The dungeon mattered.

The coffee mattered.

The Tuesday broadcasts mattered.

All of it mattered.

I took the earbuds out. I put the radio down. I got into the futon next to Akari. She stirred. She did not wake up, but she turned toward me, the way she always did, and her hand found my arm in the dark, and her fingers closed around my wrist, and she held on. She held on the way she always held on — without thinking, without waking, without knowing she was doing it. She held on because she was Akari and Akari held on.

I lay there in the dark and I looked at the ceiling and I thought about the streamer, in Sapporo, making coffee. The blue can. The good stuff. Our coffee. The coffee we had sent him. He was drinking our coffee, in his apartment, at 2:30 in the morning, after clearing the dungeon, and we were here, in the Tanaka house, in the futon, and the moon was through the window, and everything was — everything was okay.

The moon was stable.

The streamer had cleared the dungeon.

We were all still here.

Everything was going to be okay.

I closed my eyes. I slept.

The next morning, I told Akari. She cried too. Then she laughed. Then she said, "We have to send him more coffee."

"We have to send him more coffee," I agreed.

We sent him six cans. With a note:

Congratulations. You cleared the dungeon. You are now allowed to drink the good coffee on a regular basis. Please send us your address again so we can send you a housewarming gift. (This is a joke. We cannot actually send you a house. But we can send you more coffee. And miso. We make good miso.)

— Shirase and Akari

He wrote back:

I would like the miso. I would also like to visit, at some point, if that is possible. I have not been outside Sapporo in two years. I have not seen mountains in two years. I have not seen anyone who is not a government radio operator in two years. I would like to see you both. I would like to see the village. I would like to see the moon from somewhere other than my window.

I will figure out the train.

— HKB-7

We wrote back and told him to come in the spring.

He came in the spring.

But that is the next chapter.

Chapter 17.5 — Daily Life

(Shirase)

I want to tell you about the daily life. Not the moon, not the cult, not the flood, not the wedding. The small things. The actual life. The things that happened between the big things — the things that, when you add them up, turn out to be the things.

Let me start with mornings.

I wake up first. I have always woken up first. My body wakes up at 5:30 because it spent four years waking up at 5:30 for warehouse shifts and night markets and the eleven jobs, and bodies are stubborn about these things. My body does not care that there is no warehouse. My body does not care that Niigata is half-underwater. My body says: 5:30. Up. Now.

So I get up.

Akari sleeps. Akari sleeps the way a person sleeps when they have decided that eight hours is non-negotiable and the universe can fight them on it. She sleeps on her side, facing me, her hair across the pillow, her mouth slightly open. Her hand is always near my face — not touching, just near. Like she fell asleep reaching for me and got most of the way there. She does not know she does this. I have not told her. I am keeping this information for myself, the way you keep a small treasure in a drawer. Some things are too good to share.

I watch her for a minute. Maybe two. This is the part of the day I like best, although I would never admit it out loud because Akari would never

let me live it down. I watch her sleep and I feel the thing — the morning thing, the *oh, you're still here* thing, the *we made it through another night* thing. The thing is not dramatic. The thing is small. The thing is the size of a teacup. But it is mine, and I keep it.

Then I get up, because if I don't get up I will lie there all day looking at her, and the rice won't make itself.

I go to the kitchen. I make rice. I make miso. I make tea. I have, in the years since Akari started teaching me, become an adequate cook. Not a good cook. Adequate. The kind of cook who can keep two people alive without complaint. Akari is the good cook. Akari is the one who can take three ingredients and produce a meal that makes you cry. I am the one who can take the same three ingredients and produce something that is, technically, food. This is fine. Adequate is enough for mornings.

I set the table. I wake Akari up. I wake her by touching her shoulder and saying her name, the way you wake someone you love — gently, from a distance, giving them time to come back from wherever sleep took them.

She opens her eyes. She sees me. She does the small smile. The morning smile. The smile that is only for mornings, only for this, only for the first thing she sees.

"Morning," she says.

"Morning," I say.

"Rice?"

"Rice."

"Miso?"

"Miso."

"Tea?"

"Tea."

"You made breakfast."

"I made breakfast."

She sits up. She looks at me. Her eyes are doing the thing they do when she is about to tease me, which is the same as the thing they do when she is about to be sincere, which is the same as the thing they do when she is about to ask me to do the dishes. Akari's eyes are a versatile instrument.

"You're a good wife," she says.

"I'm an adequate wife."

"You're a good wife and I'm going to tell everyone."

"Shut up and eat your rice."

She laughs. The morning laugh — small, warm, the laugh that means the day has started right. She eats. I eat. We eat together in the kitchen, in the morning light that comes through the window, and we don't talk much because we don't need to talk much. We have been doing this for years. The silence is comfortable. The silence is full.

Then the day starts.

The day depends on the season. Spring is planting. Summer is growing. Fall is harvest. Winter is — well, winter is winter, we have discussed winter. Akari goes to the fields. I go to wherever I am needed — sometimes the fields with her, sometimes the temple, sometimes the village school, where I teach the children things I have learned from Wikipedia binges at 3 AM. I am not a trained teacher. I am the kind of teacher who knows slightly too much about tidal forces and slightly too little about long division. The children do not seem to mind. The children think I am funny, which I am not, but I will take it.

The afternoons are long in summer and short in winter. The afternoons are the work. The afternoons are when the things get done — the planting, the weeding, the fixing, the carrying, the chopping, the small daily acts of maintenance that keep a life running. I am good at maintenance. I have been maintaining things my whole life. I maintained my mother. I maintained the eleven jobs. I maintained the apartment in Niigata with the sad cat stain on the ceiling. I maintained myself, badly, on a park bench, until Akari came and helped.

Now I maintain a house, and a village, and a marriage, and a small daughter who is three years old and has my hair and Akari's stubbornness and a scream that can shatter glass at fifty meters.

The afternoons are the work. The evenings are ours.

Akari comes home from the fields at five. I come home from wherever I was. We meet at the house. We make dinner together — actually together, in the small kitchen, side by side, the way we have been doing it for years. She chops. I stir. She seasons. I taste. She tells me I have no palate. I tell her I have palate, I just choose not to use it. She hits me with

the wooden spoon. This is the rhythm. This is the music.

We eat. At the small table. Together. We talk about the day. The fields. The children. The village. Whatever Tendo has done now (Tendo has, in the last year, taken up woodworking, and has been making increasingly elaborate and slightly lopsided chairs for the temple, which the old man accepts with a dignity that should be commended). Whatever Obaa-chan said (Obaa-chan says whatever she wants, whenever she wants, to whoever she wants, and has recently taken to calling me "the young one" despite the fact that I am twenty-seven and she is ninety, which I find deeply flattering and slightly aggressive).

We argue about the dishes.

We argue about the dishes every evening. The same argument. I leave them in the sink. Akari wants them washed. I say I'll do them later. She says I won't. I say I will. She says I won't. I do them later. She was right. I was wrong. This is the rhythm. This is the music.

We argue about the nails.

Akari does her nails every few days, in the evening, at the table, with the lamp and the little bottles and the small brush and the patience of a saint. She does her nails the way I play video games — with total concentration, complete absorption, and a willingness to ignore the rest of the world for as long as the thing takes. I read yuri manga next to her while she does it. We sit at the table, side by side, each in our own world, occasionally reading bits aloud to each other ("Listen to this, Akari, the taller girl just said —" "Shirase, I'm doing the stars, don't talk to me" "— okay, sorry"). This is also the rhythm. This is also the music.

We argue about the manga.

I read yuri manga. Akari reads yuri manga. We disagree about yuri manga. We disagree about which yuri manga are good. We disagree about which characters are good. We disagree about which kisses are good. We disagree about endings. We disagree about everything. This is the best argument. This argument has been going on for years and will go on for years more and I look forward to it every evening.

"Read this," Akari says, handing me her phone.

I read it. "The short one is out of character."

"She's not out of character, she's developing."

"She's developing into a different character."

"That's what development is."

"It's not, that's what bad writing is."

"You have no taste."

"I have taste. I cleared Ruinverse. I know what good writing is."

"Ruinverse is a video game."

"Video games are writing."

"Video games are video games."

"You're wrong."

"You're wrong."

We are both wrong. We are both right. This is the rhythm. This is the music.

Then we go to bed. We lie in the futon, side by side. We talk in the dark. We talk about the day, about the tomorrow, about whatever comes into our heads. We have been having this conversation for years. The conversation has no beginning and no end. The conversation is just — the conversation. The thing we do, at night, in the dark, before we sleep.

"I love you," one of us says, every night. Usually her. Sometimes me. It doesn't matter who says it first. The other one says it back. This is the rhythm. This is the music.

Then we sleep.

The moon is through the window. The moon is always through the window. The moon is huge and silver and still, the way it has been for years, the way it will be for a thousand years. I don't notice it anymore. Nobody does. The moon is just the moon. The moon is just the thing in the sky, the way it was before, except closer. You get used to anything. You get used to the moon.

We sleep. We wake up. We do it again.

This is the daily life.

This is the small life, the daily life, the life that the moon tried to take. The mornings, the afternoons, the evenings, the nights. The rice, the miso, the tea. The dishes, the nails, the manga. The argument about whether video games are writing (they are). The argument about whether my cooking is adequate (it is). The argument about whether Akari is right

about the canned coffee (she is not, but I will die on this hill alone).

This is the life we kept.

This is the life that the moon did not take.

And it is enough.

It is more than enough.

It is everything.

Chapter 17.6 — The Return to Niigata

(Akari)

We went back to Niigata in the spring of the third year.

Not to live. We were not going back to live. Sakae was home now. Sakae was the Tanaka house, the village, the fields, the mountains, the moon. Sakae was where we had built our life. Sakae was where we were going to stay.

But we went back to see it.

The train was running further now. The government had been rebuilding the rail network, piece by piece, connecting the cities that had survived, reaching toward the ones that were coming back. The train went from Nagoya to Tokyo to Takasaki to Nagaoka to Niigata. It took fourteen hours. It took all day. But it went.

We went on a Tuesday.

We went on a Tuesday because Tuesdays were still ours. Tuesdays were the day we did things together, the day we had reserved for ourselves since the year before the moon. We had kept Tuesdays. We had kept them through everything. Tuesdays were the day we were the two of us, and we were not going to stop now.

The train was full. Not packed — not the way trains had been before, not the salaryman-pressed-against-salaryman full. But full. Full of people who were moving again, who were going places, who were living. Full of families, full of workers, full of couples, full of the — the aliveness of a

country that was coming back. The train was full of the sound of people talking, of children asking questions, of the conductor making announcements, of the wheels on the track. The train was full of the sound of a world that was still here.

We sat by the window. Shirase on the left, me on the right. Our knees touching under the small table. Our hands on the table, next to each other, not quite touching. The — the almost-touching. The thing we did in public, the thing we had always done, the thing that was ours. The almost-touching that was more intimate than touching, because the almost was a choice, because the almost was a — a restraint, because the almost said *I want to touch you and I am not touching you and the not-touching is the touching.*

We watched Japan go by.

Japan was — was different. Japan was the country the moon had taken and the country that had come back, and the two were not the same. The coastline was different. The rivers were different. The cities were different. The — the geography of Japan had been rewritten, and the train went through the new geography, and we watched it.

The coast was gone, in places. The — the places that had been beach towns, fishing villages, the — the places that had been low and close to the water — those places were underwater. The train went past them. The train went past the places where the water had come in and stayed, where the houses were submerged, where the roofs were just visible at low tide. The train went past them, and we looked, and we did not say anything, because there was nothing to say.

But there were new places too. Places that had been nothing before — empty fields, forest edges, the spaces between towns — and that were now something. Tent camps becoming permanent structures. Temporary shelters becoming houses. The — the beginnings of new towns, new communities, the — the places where people had gathered when the old places were gone, and where they had stayed, and where they were building. The train went past them, and we looked, and we saw the building, and we saw the — the aliveness, and we saw the stubbornness, the — the same stubbornness that had brought us to Sakae, the same stubbornness that had kept us alive, in the faces of the people building.

Japan was coming back.

Not the same Japan. A different Japan. A smaller Japan. A Japan that had been broken and was putting itself back together, the way a broken cup can be put back together, with cracks, with — with the visible evidence of the breaking, but — but whole. But functional. But — but a cup.

We reached Niigata in the late afternoon.

Niigata was — Niigata was smaller. Niigata was the city I had grown up in, the city Shirase had fled to, the city where we had met. Niigata was the city of the park bench and the convenience stores and the apartment with the sad cat stain on the ceiling. Niigata was — was not that city anymore.

The coast was gone. The port was gone. The low-lying areas — the areas where Shirase's apartment had been, the areas where the warehouse had been, the areas where the convenience stores had been —

those areas were underwater. The water had come in, and it had stayed, and the city had pulled back, had retreated to higher ground, had — had become a smaller version of itself.

But it was there.

Niigata was there.

We got off the train. We walked through the station. The station was — was half-repaired, half-functioning, the — the signs still up, the — the shops partly open, the people moving through. We walked through the station and out into the city.

We went to Hakusan Park first.

Hakusan Park was there. The — the park was there. The ginkgo trees were there. The benches were there. The fountain — the fountain that the city had shut off in October, before the moon — the fountain was running. Someone had turned it back on. The fountain was running, and the water was catching the late afternoon light, and the — the sound of it was the sound of a park, the — the sound of a place where people sit.

We went to the bench.

The bench was there. The — the bench where I had found Shirase, the — the bench where she had been lying with the dead eyes and the waist-length black hair, the — the bench where I had given her my cardigan. The bench was there.

We sat down.

We sat on the bench. Side by side. The way we had sat, that first

night. The way we had sat, a hundred times since, on other benches, on other seats, in other places. We sat on the bench, and we looked at the park, and we looked at the ginkgo trees, and we looked at the fountain.

"Shirase," I said.

"Yeah."

"This is where I found you."

"I know."

"This is the bench."

"I know."

"You were — you were right here. You were lying here. With the — the hoodie over your head. With the — the dead eyes."

"I know."

"And I said — I said *hey, are you dead?*"

"You did."

"And you said — you said *no, I'm not dead.*"

"I did."

"And I — I gave you my cardigan."

"You did."

"And the rest is —"

"The rest is everything."

"The rest is everything."

We sat there. We did not say anything for a while. The park was around us. The fountain was running. The ginkgo trees were — were starting to leaf, it was spring, the — the pale green of new ginkgo leaves was — was there, on the branches, the — the color of beginning.

"I want to tell you something," Shirase said.

"What?"

"When you sat down — that night. When you gave me the cardigan. I thought — I thought you were a hallucination. I thought — I thought I was dying, and — and you were the last thing my brain was showing me. A — a girl. A — a girl with a cardigan. A — a girl who was — was asking if I was dead. I thought — I thought you were not real."

"I was real."

"I know. I know now. But — but then — then I thought you were not. And — and then you came back. The next morning. With the onigiri. And — and I thought — I thought *this is — this is still the hallucination. She's — she's still not real. She's — she's going to — to disappear.* And — and you didn't. You — you kept — kept coming back. And — and I — I — I — I stopped — stopped thinking you were a hallucination. But — but I did not — did not stop being — being surprised. Every — every morning. Every — every time you — you showed up. I — I was — was surprised. I — I — I could not — could not believe — believe you were — were real. That — that you were — were really — really there."

"I was really there."

"I know. I know now. But — but — Akari —"

"What?"

"I — I still — I still can't — I still — sometimes — sometimes I wake up. And — and you're there. And — and I — I — I — I think *is — is this — is this real.* And — and I have to — I have to — I have to touch you. I have to — I have to put my — my hand on — on your — your face. And — and feel — feel that you're — you're real. That — that you're — you're warm. That — that you're — you're there."

"Shirase —"

"I know. I know it's — I know. But — but that's — that's what you — you did. You — you sat down on — on a bench, next to — to a — a dying — a dying woman, and — and you gave her your — your cardigan, and — and you came back, and — and you — you — you made her — made her believe — believe that — that she was — was — was allowed — allowed to — to be — be — be saved. And — and — and that's — that's not — that's not a — a small — a small thing. That's — that's the — the biggest — the biggest thing. That's — that's the thing that — that — that saved — saved me. And — and I — I — I will never — never stop — stop being — being surprised — surprised by — by it."

I looked at her. She was — she was looking at the fountain. She was — she was not looking at me. She was — she was looking at the water, the — the water that was catching the light, the — the water that was — was falling and — and rising and — and falling again. She was looking at it the way she looked at things when she was — was trying not to cry.

I put my hand on her face.

I turned her head. I — I made her look at me. I — I looked at her. I — I looked at the — the black hair, the — the young face, the — the eyes that were — were not nothing, that were — were full, that were — were hers. I looked at her.

"You're real," I said.

"I know."

"I'm real."

"I know."

"We're real."

"I know."

"This is real. The bench. The park. The — the fountain. The — the three years. The — the everything. It's real. It's — it happened. It's — it's happening. We're here."

"I know."

"And I — I — I — I love you. And — and that's real. And — and I — I — I — I'm — I'm going to — to keep — keep loving you. And — and that's real. And — and nothing — nothing the — the moon — the moon did, nothing — nothing the — the — the. Nothing. Nothing is going to — to make — make that — that not — not real."

"I know."

"I — I — I."

"I know."

We sat there. On the bench. In the park. In Niigata. In the spring. Under the moon. We sat there, and — and I held her face, and — and she held my wrist, and — and we did not — did not kiss. We — we just — just looked. We — we looked at each other, the — the way we had looked at each other on the first night, except — except now the looking was — was different. Now the looking was — was full. Now the looking was — was — was three years of — of knowing. Three years of — of being. Three years of — of everything.

We looked at each other.

Then we kissed.

On the bench. In the park. In Niigata. In the spring. Under the moon. The — the kiss that was — was not the first kiss, that was — was not the — the wedding kiss, that was — was not any of the — the kisses that — that had come before. The — the kiss that was — was this kiss. The — the bench kiss. The — the — the — the three-years-later kiss. The — the — the.

We kissed.

And — and the park was — was there. And — and the fountain was — was running. And — and the ginkgo trees were — were leafing. And — and the moon was — was overhead, huge and silver and still. And — and we were — were there. On the bench. Where it started. Where — where everything started. We — we were there, and — and we were — were kissing, and — and the world was — was — was there, and — and we were — were in it.

We were in it.

We were — were in the world. The — the real world. The — the world that — that had — had almost ended, and — and had not ended, and — and was — was still — still here. The — the world with the — the broken coastlines and — and the new towns and — and the trains running and — and the people building and — and the — the everything. The — the world that — that we were — were in. The — the world that — that we were — were part of. The — the world that — that we were — were going to — to keep — keep being — being in.

For as long as we were alive.

And we were going to be alive for a long time.

Because we were stubborn.

Because we were — were the — the two — the two most stubborn — stubborn people in — in the history of — of Niigata Prefecture.

And we were — were sitting on — on a bench.

Where it started.

Where it — where it was — was always going to — to start.

Where it — where it was — was always going to — to — to.

We were — were sitting on a bench.

And we were — were kissing.

And the moon was — was watching.

And the moon was — was not — not falling.

And we were — were not — not falling.

We were — were — were.

We were.

Chapter 17.7 — The Conversation About Children

(Shirase)

We had the conversation about children in the winter of the third year.

We had been not-having it for months. We had been circling it the way you circle a thing that is too big to approach directly — coming at it from different angles, mentioning related things, then retreating. "Tendo's been helping at the school," I would say, and Akari would say "mm," and the conversation would move on. "The children are getting taller," Akari would say, and I would say "mm," and the conversation would move on. We were tiptoeing. We were both tiptoeing. We were too stubborn to bring it up directly and too scared to leave it alone.

I don't know why I was scared. No, that's a lie. I know exactly why I was scared. I was scared because of my mother.

I had been thinking about children since the spring. Since the future came back. Since the moon stopped and the government started broadcasting and the trains started running and the world started being a world again. The future had come back, and the future had a shape, and the shape had a question in it, and the question was: children?

I wanted children. I wanted a child. I wanted a child with Akari. I wanted a daughter. I wanted to hold a small person who was half me and half Akari and tell her about the moon and teach her to read and watch her grow up in the village under the mountains. I wanted it so badly my

teeth hurt.

But I was scared.

I was scared because my mother had been — my mother. The kitchen. The shochu. The television on very low. The nothing. The eyes that did not see me. I was scared that the nothing was in me. I was scared that I would pass it on. I was scared that I would have a daughter and the daughter would be eight years old and standing at the stove making miso soup and I would be at the table with a bottle and a cigarette and the nothing and I would say, *you're better at this than I ever was*, and the daughter would learn, the way I had learned, to lie.

I was scared of being my mother.

I should have known better. I should have known that I was not my mother. Akari had been telling me for years that I was not my mother. The village had been telling me. The old man had been telling me, in his way, by letting me teach the children. But fear is not reasonable. Fear does not listen to evidence. Fear sits in the chest and says: but what if.

We had the conversation on a Sunday evening. Sunday evenings were ours — after the temple, after the meal, after the being-with-everyone, we went home and we were just us. Sunday evenings were for the big conversations. Sunday evenings were when we had decided to leave Niigata. Sunday evenings were when we had decided to stay in Sakae. Sunday evenings were when we had decided to get married. Sunday evenings had a track record.

It was December. The second winter. The second winter was easier than the first — we knew what we were doing, we had prepared, the

snow was less scary when you knew it was coming. We were sitting on the futon. The lamp was on. The fire was banked. Akari was doing her nails — dark red tonight, with tiny gold dots. I was reading a yuri manga — a new one, from the press in Nagoya, about two girls in a bookstore. It was good. I was enjoying it.

"Akari," I said.

"Mm." She did not look up. She was doing the gold dots.

"I want to talk about something."

She looked up. She saw my face. She put the brush down.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay."

We looked at each other. I had no idea how to start. I had been thinking about this for weeks and I had not figured out the first sentence. I am not good at first sentences. I am good at flat, stubborn declarations. I am not good at *I want to talk about something*.

"Shirase," Akari said. "Just say it."

"Children."

She went still. The still she went when she was paying attention. The still she went when she knew something important was happening.

"Children," she said.

"Yeah."

"You want to talk about children."

"Yeah."

"Having children."

"Yeah."

"With me."

"With you. If you want. If you're ready. If —"

"Shirase."

"Yeah."

"I've been thinking about it too."

I blinked. "You have?"

"Since the wedding. Since before the wedding. Since the spring. Since the future came back. I've been thinking about it. I didn't know how to bring it up."

"You didn't know how to bring it up?"

"You think you're the only one who's bad at this?"

"I —"

"I'm bad at this too. I didn't know if you wanted —"

"I want."

"You want?"

"I want. I've been thinking about it for weeks. I want a child. With you. I want to be a mother. With you. I want us to be mothers."

"Shirase —"

"But I'm scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Of being my mother."

She did not say anything for a moment. She looked at me. She saw the fear — the real fear, the fear I had been pushing down, the fear I had been hiding from. The fear of the kitchen. The fear of the shochu. The fear of the nothing. The fear of becoming the woman who sat at the table and did not see her daughter.

"Shirase," she said. "You are not your mother."

"I know. But what if — what if I —"

"You're not. You are the person who sat on a bench and couldn't move. You are the person who ate the melon pan. You are the person who kept going. You are the person who learned to be there. You are the person who is here, with me, every day. You are the person who made me tamagoyaki. Badly. You are the person who asked me to marry her, in the kitchen, with burnt rice. You are not your mother. You are you."

"But the nothing — what if the nothing comes back — what if I have a child and I can't —"

"The nothing is a thing that happens. The nothing is not you. The nothing is the thing that visits. And when it comes, I will be there. I will

pull you back. The way I promised. Every time. And the child will have two mothers. Two mothers who are stubborn. Two mothers who are there. And if one of us goes to the nothing, the other will be there. For the child. For each other. That's what we are. We are the people who are there."

"Akari —"

"Listen. I want a child. With you. I want a girl. I want to name her. I want to hold her. I want to teach her things. I want to braid her hair. I want to watch her learn to read. I want to watch her play in the dirt. I want to be the mother my mother couldn't be. I want to be the mother who holds her daughter. I want to be the mother who is there. I want that. With you. Only with you."

"With me."

"With you. Only with you."

"I —"

"I know you're scared. I know. I'm scared too. But we are the most stubborn people in Niigata Prefecture. We are the most stubborn people in Japan. We are the most stubborn people in the history of the world. If anyone can do this, we can."

"We can."

"We can."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"Okay."

We sat there. On the futon. In the lamp light. With the fire banked. With the moon through the window. We had decided. We were going to have a baby. We were going to be mothers.

I was terrified.

I was more terrified than I had been since the bench. Since the first night. Since the flood. I was terrified in a way that went all the way down, in a way that touched the place where the nothing lived, in a way that made me want to curl up in a ball and not move for a week.

But I was also — and this surprised me — happy.

I was happy. The happiness was small, like a pilot light. The happiness was the size of a teacup, like the morning thing. The happiness was — I was going to have a baby. With Akari. With the most stubborn person I had ever met. With the person who had sat down on a bench and given me her cardigan and come back the next morning with onigiri. With the person who had pulled me out of the nothing, again and again and again. With the person who loved me. With the person I loved.

I was going to have a baby.

I was terrified. I was happy. Both at the same time. The two feelings sat in my chest, side by side, like two people on a bench.

"Akari," I said.

"Yeah."

"How do we — I mean, where do we — there's no clinic in Sakae.

There's no — how do we even —"

Akari smiled. The small smile. The smile that meant she had already thought of this.

"I've been writing to my mother," she said.

"Your mother."

"She's in Nagoya. She has contacts. She's been — she's been looking into it. For us. She found a clinic. In Nagoya. They do — they do the thing. The procedure. With a donor. She's been — she wanted to be sure, before she mentioned it. She wanted to have a plan. She's my mother. She made a spreadsheet."

I stared at her.

"Your mother made a spreadsheet."

"She made a spreadsheet. About how we would have a baby. She made a spreadsheet about our future child."

"Your mother made a spreadsheet about our baby."

"She's my mother."

"She's your mother."

"She loves us."

"She loves us."

"She made a spreadsheet."

"She made a spreadsheet."

We both started laughing. We laughed the way we laughed when things were too big to do anything else — the helpless, helpless laughter of two people who had survived the moon and the cult and the flood and the winter, and were now sitting on a futon in a small house in the mountains, planning a baby by means of a spreadsheet made by their mother-in-law.

"She made a spreadsheet," I said again, because I could not get over it.

"She made a spreadsheet."

"Of course she made a spreadsheet."

"Of course she made a spreadsheet."

"What's on the spreadsheet?"

"I don't know. She said she would send it. She said it's 'comprehensive.'"

I put my face in my hands. I was laughing and crying at the same time, which is a thing that happens when you have been scared for weeks and the fear suddenly turns into something else.

"Send me the spreadsheet," I said.

"I'll send you the spreadsheet."

"Tell your mother — tell her thank you. Tell her — tell her we're going to have a baby. Tell her — tell her —"

"I'll tell her."

"Tell her tonight."

"I'll tell her tonight."

"Tell her to put it on the spreadsheet."

"I'll tell her to put it on the spreadsheet."

I looked up. Akari was looking at me. She was laughing too, but she was also crying, the way I was crying, the way you cry when something that was too big to hold suddenly becomes something you can hold, because there is someone else holding it with you.

"We're going to have a baby," I said.

"We're going to have a baby."

"We're going to have a baby."

"Yes."

"With a spreadsheet."

"With a spreadsheet."

"Your mother's spreadsheet."

"My mother's spreadsheet."

"I love your mother."

"I love your mother too."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"We're going to have a baby."

"We're going to have a baby."

We lay down on the futon, side by side, facing each other. We held hands. We did not kiss. We did not need to kiss. We just held hands and looked at each other and laughed and cried and said *we're going to have a baby* about forty more times, until the words stopped sounding like words and started sounding like a chant, like a prayer, like the thing we were going to keep saying until it was true.

The moon was through the window.

The moon did not say anything.

But I think the moon was pleased.

I think the moon, for once, was on our side.

Chapter 17.8 — The Streamer Visits

(Shirase)

The streamer came to Sakae in the summer of the fourth year.

He came by train, the same way we had gone to Nagoya — the long way, the slow way, the way that took you through everything that had happened to Japan in the last four years. From Sapporo, across the strait, down through Tohoku, through the broken coast and the rebuilt coast and the parts that were still just empty. Two days. He had written to say he was coming. He had written to say he was nervous. He had written: *I have not spoken to a woman in three years. I have not spoken to a man in two years. I have spoken exclusively to a microphone and a cat. The cat does not answer. I am concerned about my ability to hold a conversation.*

I had written back: *Don't worry. We are difficult to talk to. We will make you feel better about your social skills.*

He had written back: *That is not as reassuring as you think it is.*

He came on a Tuesday, because Tuesdays were still ours and we had decided that the streamer's first visit should be on a Tuesday, because Tuesdays were the day we had always listened to him, and there was a rightness to it. Tuesdays were the day. Tuesdays had always been the day.

Akari and I were at the gate when the car came up the forestry road. We were both nervous. Akari had changed her outfit three times that morning, which she only did when she was nervous, and which she denied doing. I had brushed my hair four times, which I only did when I was nervous, and which Akari had noticed and not mentioned because

she is generous in the places where it matters.

The car stopped. The door opened. A man got out.

He was not what I had expected. I don't know what I had expected. Someone taller, maybe. Someone more — I don't know. More like a voice. The voice I had been listening to for four years was low and calm and slightly ironic, and I think I had expected the person to match. He did not match. He was short. Shorter than me, even, which is saying something. He was maybe forty-one, which I knew he was, but he looked older. He was thin in the way people get thin when they have been alone too long and have forgotten to eat regularly. He was balding. He wore glasses. He was wearing a plaid shirt that did not fit him and jeans that did not fit him and sneakers that were falling apart. He looked, in short, like a man who had spent the last four years in a room with a radio and a cat and not much else.

He looked at us. We looked at him.

Nobody said anything for a second. The driver of the car — a government driver, one of the ones assigned to the relay stations — was already pulling away. The forestry road was quiet. The trees were quiet. The streamer was quiet. We were quiet.

Then he took off his glasses and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and put his glasses back on, and he said, in a voice that cracked halfway through:

"Shirase?"

"Yeah."

"Akari?"

"Yeah."

"I —" He stopped. He took a breath. "I'm Tanaka Kenji. I'm — HKB-7. I'm — I'm sorry. I thought I would be able to do this without crying. I have clearly miscalculated."

He was crying. Not a lot. Just the tears, the way I cried, the quiet kind. He was standing at the gate of a village he had never been to, in front of two women he had never met, and he was crying, because he had been alone for four years and now he was not.

I went to him. I put my hand on his shoulder. His shoulder was bonier than I expected. He had not been eating enough. I made a mental note to feed him.

"I'm glad you're here," I said.

"I'm glad you're alive," he said. "I'm glad — I'm glad —" He stopped again. He wiped his eyes again. "I'm sorry. I'm going to be doing this all week. I apologize in advance."

"Don't apologize," Akari said. She had come up beside me. She put her hand on his other shoulder. "You're here. That's the thing. You're here."

"I'm here."

"You're here."

"I'm here."

We brought him inside. We brought him to the Tanaka house. We sat

him down at the table. We made him tea. He drank the tea. He stopped crying. He looked around the house — the small kitchen, the futon in the corner, the bookshelf with the yuri manga, the photograph of our wedding on the wall (Akari in white, me in the suit that did not fit, the old man presiding, the village behind us, the moon above).

"You have a nice house," he said.

"It's a dead man's house," I said.

"Shirase," Akari said.

"What? It's true. Tanaka-san died in the first earthquake. The village gave us his house. We have not changed the name."

"You named the streamer Tanaka," Akari said. "This is going to be confusing."

The streamer — Tanaka Kenji — looked at me. "Tanaka?"

"The house is the Tanaka house. The previous owner was Tanaka. We did not name it after you."

"I should hope not. That would be creepy."

"It would be a little creepy."

"Although —" He looked around again. "It's a nice house. I wouldn't mind having a house like this."

"You can stay," Akari said. "We have a spare room. The village has been talking about adding a room to the school. We could use a teacher who knows things."

"I don't know things. I know one dungeon."

"You know radio."

"I know radio."

"We need radio. We need someone to run the relay station we're building. We need someone to teach the children about communications. We need someone —" She stopped. She looked at me. She looked at him. "We need a friend."

Tanaka Kenji looked at her. He looked at me. He took off his glasses again. He wiped his eyes again. He put his glasses back on.

"I'm going to cry again," he said.

"That's fine," I said. "We're used to it. Akari cries all the time."

"I do not," Akari said.

"You cry at yuri manga."

"That's different."

"It's not different."

"It's different because it's yuri manga."

"That's not a defense."

"It's a complete defense."

Tanaka Kenji started laughing. It was a strange laugh — rusty, like a machine that had not been used in a while. He laughed and he wiped his eyes and he laughed again.

"You two are exactly the way I imagined," he said.

"We're worse," I said.

"You're better," he said.

He stayed for a week.

We showed him the village. The temple, where the old man poured him sake on the first night and said, "Welcome. Don't break anything." The school, where the children stared at him with the unfiltered directness that children have, and one of them — Hana, who was two at the time — walked up to him, looked at his glasses, and said, "Why are your eyes so small?"

"Hana," Akari said. "We don't say that to people."

"But they are small."

"They're regular size."

"They're smaller than yours."

"Hana."

"It's fine," Tanaka Kenji said. He crouched down. He smiled at Hana. "My eyes are small because I've been looking at one thing for too long. I've been looking at a video game for six years. My eyes got tired and shrank."

Hana considered this. She nodded. She accepted it. She patted him on the knee and walked away. Tanaka Kenji stood up.

"Your daughter is terrifying," he said.

"We know," I said.

He met everyone. The old man, who approved of him because he drank his sake without complaint. Obaa-chan, who approved of him because he was short and she was short and she had decided they were allies. Tendo, who approved of him because Tanaka Kenji did not flinch when Tendo introduced himself, and who later told me, quietly, "He has the look. The look of someone who has been somewhere else and come back. I know that look." The farmers, who approved of him because he was willing to carry things, even though he was bad at it.

He was bad at carrying things. He had the upper body strength of a particularly ambitious noodle. The first time he tried to carry a basket of vegetables from the field to the storage shed, he made it about thirty meters before his arms gave out and the basket tipped and six tomatoes rolled into the drainage ditch. He stood there, looking at the tomatoes in the ditch, with the expression of a man who had just cleared a six-year dungeon and was being defeated by root vegetables.

"I am useless," he said.

"You're not useless," Akari said. "You're just not a farmer."

"What am I?"

"You're a radio operator."

"I'm a radio operator who can't carry tomatoes."

"That's a very specific kind of radio operator."

"It's a very useless kind."

We picked up the tomatoes. We carried the basket for him. We did not make fun of him, because we are kind people, and also because we knew he would make fun of himself if we gave him five minutes.

He did. He made fun of himself for the rest of the week. He made fun of himself at dinner, when he could not use chopsticks properly and dropped a piece of tofu on his shirt. He made fun of himself at the temple, when he tripped on the step and almost knocked over the incense burner. He made fun of himself at the school, when he tried to teach the children about radio waves and they asked him so many questions about the moon that he ran out of answers and had to sit down.

He was funny. He was actually, genuinely funny. Not in the way the manga was funny, not in the way the videos were funny — funny in the way a person is funny when they have spent four years alone with a cat and have developed a sense of humor that is entirely their own and slightly strange. He was funny the way you are funny when you have stopped trying to be funny and have just started being yourself.

We liked him. Akari liked him. I liked him. The village liked him. Even Tendo liked him, which was saying something, because Tendo did not like anyone easily.

He left after a week. He went back to Sapporo, to his radio, to his cat, to his apartment. But he promised to come back. He promised to come back every year. He promised to come back for longer, if we could stand him.

"We can stand you," I said.

"You say that now."

"We'll say it then."

"You don't know. I'm very annoying. I talk about the dungeon. I talk about it a lot."

"We know. We've been listening to you talk about the dungeon for four years."

"And you still want me to come back?"

"We want you to come back."

"Why?"

"Because you're our friend."

He cried again. He cried at the gate, in front of the car, in front of the driver, in front of Akari and me. He cried and he wiped his eyes and he got in the car and he waved and the car went down the forestry road and he was gone.

Akari and I stood at the gate and watched the car go.

"I like him," Akari said.

"I like him too."

"He's terrible at carrying things."

"He's terrible at carrying things."

"He's good at crying."

"He's very good at crying."

"He's our friend."

"He's our friend."

We went back to the house. We had dinner. We argued about the dishes. We went to bed. We lay in the futon, side by side, and we talked in the dark.

"He should move here," Akari said.

"He should move here."

"We have room."

"We have room."

"He could run the relay station."

"He could run the relay station."

"He could teach the children."

"He could teach the children."

"He could carry tomatoes."

"He could not carry tomatoes."

"Right. He could not carry tomatoes. But he could do other things."

"He could do other things."

"He should move here."

"He should move here."

"We should write to him."

"We should write to him tonight."

"Tomorrow."

"Tonight."

"Tomorrow. He needs to sleep. He's been crying for a week."

"He's been crying for a week."

"He needs to sleep."

"He needs to sleep."

We wrote to him the next day. We told him to come back. We told him to come back for good. We told him we had a room. We told him we had tomatoes he could not carry. We told him we had a village that had decided he belonged.

He wrote back. The letter was short. It said:

Yes.

He moved to Sakae in the fall.

He brought his radio. He brought his cat. The cat's name was Boss. Boss was a large, indifferent tabby who had never lived anywhere but a Sapporo apartment and who was deeply offended by the existence of mountains. Boss spent the first three days in Sakae sitting on Tanaka Kenji's bed and staring at the wall with the expression of a cat who had

been personally betrayed.

The children loved Boss. Boss tolerated the children. The children chased Boss. Boss fled from the children. The children laughed. Boss sulked. This became a daily event. This became a village institution.

Tanaka Kenji set up his radio in the spare room. He started broadcasting from Sakae. He kept the Tuesday slot, 2 AM, the same as before. He broadcast about the dungeon (he had started a new dungeon; he was, he said, "too old to clear it, but not too old to die on floor one repeatedly"). He broadcast about the village. He broadcast about the cat. He broadcast about us.

He called us "the two women in the mountains who put up with me." He called us that on the radio, every Tuesday. He called us that to the — I don't know how many listeners he had now. More than forty-three. The network was growing. People were listening. People were writing to him. People were writing to us.

We had a friend.

We had a friend who lived in our house, who could not carry tomatoes, who cried easily, who talked about the dungeon too much, who had a cat named Boss who hated mountains.

We had a friend.

And the world felt, suddenly, a little more complete.

Like a puzzle with one piece missing, and the piece had been found, and it fit, and the picture was — the picture was whole.

Not perfect. Not unbroken. But whole.

Whole.

We were whole.

Epilogue — Morning After the End

(Shirase)

Five years later.

I am writing this on the porch of the Tanaka house, in the morning, with a cup of barley tea that Akari made for me before she went to the fields. The tea is hot. The morning is cold. The moon is — the moon is still there. The moon is always there. The moon has not moved in five years. It hangs in the western sky in the morning and the eastern sky at night, huge and silver and constant, the way it has been since perigee. The astronomers — there are astronomers again, now, in Nagoya and Sapporo and a new one in Sendai — say it has settled into a new orbit. A closer orbit. A stable orbit. They do not know why. They have theories. The theories are boring. I do not read them.

I read other things.

I read yuri manga. On paper, now, because there are printers again. There is a small press in Nagoya that prints yuri manga. There is a small press in Sapporo that prints yuri light novels. There is a small press in Niigata — rebuilt Niigata, the new Niigata, the Niigata that is half the size of the old one because the old one is mostly underwater — that prints a yuri manga magazine, monthly, and I subscribe to it, and Akari brings it home from her trips to the coast, and I read it on the porch in the morning, and the world is — the world is okay.

I read the yuri web novels on Syosetu. The site is back. The site has been back for two years. There are new writers. There are writers who

were children when the moon fell and who are writing now, in their twenties, about girls who love girls, and the writing is rough and the feelings are huge and the girls always, always kiss at the end. I read them. I cry at them. I leave long comments in broken Japanese that the writers probably do not read.

I watch YouTube. The site is back. The site has been back for a year. The videos are different now — fewer unboxings, fewer makeup tutorials, more "how to rebuild a roof" and "how to purify river water" and "how to grow rice in mountain soil." But there is also a guy in Hokkaido. The same guy. The mystery dungeon guy. He cleared the dungeon, three years ago. He is now grinding a different dungeon. He has forty-three viewers on a good day. I am one of them.

I play video games. On a phone, still. The emulator works. There is — there is a new *Ruinverse* now. *Ruinverse: Re-Union II.* It came out last year. The two leads are older. They are living together. They have a small house. They argue about the state of the kitchen. They kiss at the end of every chapter. The writing is — the writing is sentimental. The writing is — the writing is the kind of thing that would have made me cry when I was twenty-two and that makes me cry now, at twenty-seven, for different reasons. I play it on the porch in the morning, and Akari comes home from the fields and finds me crying, and she sighs, and she makes me more tea, and she sits next to me and reads over my shoulder, and she says, "That's not how you make miso, the writer has clearly never made miso," and I say, "It's a video game, Akari, the miso is not the point," and she says, "The miso is always the point," and we argue about the miso for ten minutes, and then we kiss, and then I go back to the game, and she goes back to whatever she was doing, and that is — that is a Tuesday.

That is most Tuesdays.

Akari is — Akari is twenty-two now. She is the age I was when we met. She is — she is taller than me, still, which she has been since the second month I knew her. She has grown into her height. She is — she is beautiful, in the way that women who have spent five years farming and cooking and living are beautiful. Her hair is still blonde. She still dyes it. She will always dye it. She maintains the roots, the way her mother told her to, the way she has done since she was sixteen. Her nails are still painted. Today they are dark green with tiny gold leaves. She did them last night, sitting on the futon, with the lamp, while I read yuri manga next to her. It took her an hour. I did not complain. I have learned not to complain about the nails. The nails are hers. The nails are the one thing that is entirely hers.

She is — she is a farmer, now. She was not a farmer when I met her. She was a high school student. She was a high school student who was good at housework and good at cooking and good at laundry and good at — at being alive, in the small daily ways that I was not good at. She has translated those skills into farming. She is — she is good at it. She is better at it than I am. She is better at it than most of the village. She has — she has a way with the rice paddies, a way with the vegetables, a way of looking at a field and knowing what it needs. The villagers ask her. The villagers trust her. She is — she is one of them, now. She has been one of them for five years.

She is — she is my wife.

I am not — I am not going to be precious about this. We are not legally married. Japan does not allow it. There is a movement, in Nagoya and

Sapporo and the new Niigata, to allow it. There are petitions. There are protests. There are politicians who say it will happen. It has not happened yet. We are not legally married.

But we are married.

We had a ceremony. Three years ago. In the temple in Sakae. The old man — the old man from the gate, who is now eighty, who is still alive, who is still pouring himself sake every evening — he presided. The whole village came. Akari wore white. Not a wedding dress — a yukata, white, that the village seamstress had made for her. I wore — I wore a suit. A real suit. The only one I had ever owned. Akari had bought it for me, on a trip to Nagoya, the year before. It did not fit very well. She said it fit perfectly. She was lying. I did not care.

We said vows. We wrote them ourselves. Akari's were better than mine. Akari's were — Akari's were about the bench, and the melon pan, and the years, and the moon. Mine were — mine were about her. Mine were — mine were too short, because I am not good with words, and because everything I wanted to say I had already said, in the small house, in the dark, in the year and a half before, and there was nothing left to say that was new, only the same old thing, which was: *I love you. I am going to keep loving you. I am going to be too stubborn to stop.*

We kissed. In front of the whole village. On the steps of the temple. Under the moon.

The moon was — the moon was there. The moon is always there. The moon was huge and silver and constant, the way it has been for five years, the way it will be for — for however long. The astronomers say the

moon will be there for at least another thousand years, in its new orbit, before tidal drag starts pulling it back out. A thousand years. The moon is going to outlive us. The moon is going to outlive our children, if we have children. The moon is going to outlive our grandchildren. The moon is — the moon is just there now. The moon is — the moon is the sky.

We have not decided about children. We talk about it. We — we argue about it, the way we argue about everything, with stubbornness and love and a refusal to let the argument be the end of us. Akari wants children. She wants — she wants a girl. She wants — she has ideas about the girl. She has names. She has — she has a whole plan, which she has written in a notebook, because Akari writes plans in notebooks, the way I write plans in notebooks, because we are the same kind of stubborn and we have been the same kind of stubborn for seven years now.

I am — I am scared. I am scared of being a mother. I am scared because my mother was not a mother, and I do not know how to be one, and I am afraid I will — I will pass on the nothing, the nothing my mother passed to me, the nothing I carried on a park bench at one in the morning when I was twenty-two.

Akari says I will not. Akari says — Akari says I am not my mother. Akari says I am the most stubborn person she has ever met, and stubborn is not nothing, stubborn is — stubborn is the opposite of nothing, stubborn is the thing that keeps showing up, stubborn is the thing that keeps bringing onigiri, stubborn is the thing that keeps being there even when being there is hard.

Akari says I will be a good mother.

I think Akari is right.

I think Akari is right about most things.

I think — I think we are going to have a daughter. Not this year. Maybe next year. Maybe the year after. We are — we are going to find a way. We are — we are going to find a clinic, in Nagoya, that does the thing. We are — we are going to find a donor. We are — we are going to do this. We are stubborn. We are going to do this.

But not today.

Today I am sitting on the porch of the Tanaka house, with a cup of barley tea, with the moon in the western sky, with the morning cold on my face, and Akari is in the fields, and the village is waking up around me, and the world is — the world is okay. The world is broken, but the world is okay. The world is — the world is going to be here tomorrow. And the day after. And the day after that. And I am going to be here, in the Tanaka house, with Akari, for — for however long. For — for as long as the moon. For — for as long as I am stubborn, which is — which is going to be a long time.

I am going to be stubborn for a long time.

I am going to love Akari for a long time.

I am going to — I am going to live. I am going to live the way I have always lived, which is badly and stubbornly and with a refusal to quit that the universe has been trying to break for twenty-seven years and that the universe has not broken yet. I am going to live in the small dead man's house in the village in the mountains under the moon. I am going to play

video games. I am going to read yuri manga. I am going to watch the streamer in Hokkaido grind his new dungeon. I am going to argue with Akari about the dishes and the nails and the miso and the children and the moon. I am going to — I am going to be alive.

I am going to be alive, and Akari is going to be alive, and we are going to be alive together, and that is — that is the whole story. That is — that is all there is. There is no — there is no big ending. There is no — no dramatic resolution. There is no — no moment where the music swells and the credits roll. There is just — there is just the morning. There is just the tea. There is just the porch. There is just the moon. There is just Akari, coming up the path from the fields, with mud on her boots and a basket of vegetables on her hip and the sun behind her and the moon behind her and the whole sky behind her and the whole world behind her and — and me, on the porch, watching her come home.

She sees me. She smiles. It is — it is a small smile. It is — it is the smile I fell in love with, seven years ago, on a park bench, in the rain, when she gave me her cardigan and did not ask for it back. It is the same smile. It has always been the same smile.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey," I say.

"Tea?"

"Made some."

"Good."

She comes up the steps. She kisses me — quickly, casually, the way

you kiss someone you have been kissing for five years and intend to keep kissing for fifty. She goes inside. I hear her putting the basket down. I hear her washing her hands. I hear her — I hear her, in the small dead man's house, being alive.

I drink my tea.

The moon watches.

I watch the moon back.

"We're still here," I tell it.

The moon does not answer.

But it has heard me.

I can tell.

✦✦✦

FIN.

Epilogue II — Ten Years After

(Akari)

Ten years.

It has been ten years since the moon started falling. Ten years since the NHK banner. Ten years since the first tide. Ten years since the road, and the flood, and the winter, and the radio. Ten years since the moon stopped.

It has been seven years since the wedding.

It has been five years since Tanaka Kenji cleared the second dungeon and moved to Sakae and brought his cat.

It has been three years since our daughter was born.

Her name is Hana.

We named her Hana because we wanted a name that was short, and a name that meant something, and a name that was not the name of anyone we had lost. Hana. Flower. The simplest name. The most stubborn name. A flower is the thing that grows in the crack in the pavement. A flower is the thing that comes back after winter. A flower is the thing that does not give up.

She is three years old.

She has Shirase's hair — black, long, the kind of black that drinks the light and gives nothing back. She has my height, or she will have my height; the doctor in Nagaoka says she is going to be tall. She has

Shirase's face, the face that does not age, the face that the strangers on the train had opinions about. She is, by any objective measure, the most beautiful child I have ever seen. I am biased. I do not care.

She is also the most stubborn child I have ever met, and I have met Shirase.

She is stubborn the way Shirase is stubborn — quietly, completely, with a refusal to quit that goes all the way down. She does not cry when she falls down. She does not cry when she is tired. She does not cry when she is hungry. She does not cry when the other children take her toys. She just — looks at them. With the eyes. The stubborn eyes. The eyes that say *I am here and I am not leaving and you will give that back.*

The other children give it back.

She is three.

It is a Tuesday morning. I am on the porch of the Tanaka house, writing this. I don't know why I'm writing this. I'm not a writer. Shirase is the writer — Shirase writes in notebooks, Shirase writes in margins, Shirase writes the way other people breathe. I don't write. But today, on this Tuesday morning, I wanted to write. I wanted to put it down. I wanted to — I don't know. I wanted to make a record. I wanted someone to know.

So I'm writing.

The moon is in the western sky. It is setting behind the mountains. It is huge and silver and still. It has not moved in eight years. The astronomers — there are real astronomers again, in Nagoya and Sapporo and a new observatory in Sendai — say it will be there for another thousand years, in

its new orbit. A thousand years. The moon will outlive us. The moon will outlive Hana. The moon will outlive our grandchildren, if we have grandchildren. The moon will outlive everything we are and everything we know.

That used to scare me. It doesn't anymore. The moon is just the moon. The moon is just the thing in the sky. You get used to anything. You get used to the moon.

Shirase is inside. She is at the desk. She is playing *Ruinverse III* — the third game, the one that came out last year, the one where the two leads are older and married and living in a small house and arguing about the dishes. The game is, frankly, too on the nose. Shirase loves it. Shirase cried at the opening cutscene. Shirase cried at the midpoint. Shirase cried at the ending. Shirase cried at the credits. Shirase cried at the bonus dungeon. I have stopped being surprised by the things Shirase cries at. I have stopped being surprised by anything Shirase does. We have been together for ten years. I know her. I know her the way you know a piece of music you have been listening to for your whole life. I know the timing. I know the changes. I know the parts that make me cry.

Hana is at my feet. She is playing in the dirt. She is building something — I don't know what. A castle, maybe. A mountain. A representation of the moon. She has been working on it for an hour, with the focus of a surgeon and the stubbornness of — well, of herself. Of Shirase. Of me. She is ours, and she is stubborn, and she is building something in the dirt, and she does not want to be interrupted.

I will not interrupt her.

The village is waking up around us. I can hear the old man, somewhere, doing the thing he does every morning — walking the perimeter of the village with his walking stick, checking on things, making sure everything is still there. He is seventy now. He is slower than he was. He is still the old man. He still pours himself sake every evening. He still presides over things. He is still the most patient person I have ever met, with the possible exception of Tanaka Kenji's cat.

Tanaka Kenji is in his room, broadcasting. It is Tuesday. Tuesday is his broadcast day. He has been broadcasting from Sakae for five years now. He has more listeners than forty-three. He has — I don't know how many. Hundreds, maybe. Maybe more. The network has grown. The world has come back, piece by piece, and the network has grown with it. He broadcasts about the dungeon. He broadcasts about the village. He broadcasts about Hana, who he calls "the small one." He broadcasts about Boss, who he calls "the small one's nemesis." Boss and Hana have a rivalry. Boss sits on walls. Hana tries to pet Boss. Boss walks away. Hana follows. Boss runs. Hana chases. This has been going on for a year. Neither of them has won.

Obaa-chan is on her porch. She is ninety now. She is still watching the moon. She has been watching the moon for ten years, from the same porch, in the same chair. She says the moon has not moved. She says she knew it would stop. She says she knew it the way you know the weather. She is the village's authority on the moon. The astronomers in Sendai write to her. She writes back. Her handwriting is terrible. Her observations are impeccable.

Tendo is in his workshop. He is making a chair. He has been making

chairs for five years. The temple is full of his chairs. The school is full of his chairs. The village is full of his chairs. The chairs are all slightly lopsided. The chairs are all beautiful. The old man says Tendo's chairs are the only things in the village that have character. I think he means it as a compliment. Tendo takes it as a compliment. Tendo is, these days, the kind of person who takes things as compliments. He has changed. He is not the man in the white robe. He is not the man at the gate. He is the man who makes chairs. He is the man who carries things. He is the man who is there. He is our friend. He is — he is part of the village. He is part of us.

The world is okay.

The world is not the world that was. The world is broken. The world is smaller. The world is missing pieces — the coastlines, the cities, the people. The world is the world after the moon, and the world after the moon is not the world before the moon. I do not pretend it is. I do not pretend the missing pieces do not matter. They matter. They will always matter.

But the world is okay.

The trains are running. The postal service is running. The government is in Nagoya, and the government is — trying. The government is not what it was, but it is trying. The markets are open. The schools are open. The hospitals are open, mostly. People are farming. People are building. People are having children. People are falling in love. People are — people are living. The way people live, after. The way people live, when the worst has happened and they have to figure out what comes next.

My mother is in Nagoya. She comes to Sakae every few months. She takes the train, and then the car, and then she walks up the forestry road, because she says walking is good for her and also because she likes the look on Hana's face when Hana sees her grandmother coming up the hill. Hana calls her "Obaa-sama." My mother pretends to be embarrassed by this. My mother is not embarrassed. My mother loves it. My mother loves Hana. My mother loves Shirase. My mother loves me. My mother has learned, in the last ten years, how to love us in the way she could not love us before — without the spreadsheet, without the bunker, without the plan. Just — love. Just being there. Just holding on.

She held Hana when Hana was born. She was in the room. She was the first person, after Shirase and me, to hold her. She held her and she cried and she said, "She has your hair." And Shirase said, "She has Akari's stubborn." And my mother said, "God help us all."

She was right.

God help us all.

I am writing this on the porch of the Tanaka house. It is a Tuesday morning. It is ten years after the moon started falling. The moon is setting behind the mountains. Shirase is inside, playing a game. Hana is at my feet, building something in the dirt. The village is waking up. The world is okay.

I am going to stop writing now.

Not because I'm done. Not because there isn't more to say. There is more to say. There will always be more to say. There is — there is the streamer, and the cat, and the chairs. There is the midwinter festival.

There is the spring planting. There is the autumn harvest. There is the yuri manga we argue about. There is the coffee we send to Sapporo, except we don't send it to Sapporo anymore because Tanaka Kenji is here and he buys his own. There is the way Shirase looks at me in the morning. There is the way Hana says "Mama" — she says it to both of us, we did not plan this, she just decided we were both Mama, and we did not correct her, because she is right. There is the way the moon looks at night. There is the way the snow falls. There is the way the river sounds, far below, in the valley. There is — there is everything.

But I am going to stop writing now, because Hana has finished her thing in the dirt, and she is looking up at me, and she is saying, "Mama, look. I made the moon."

I look.

She has made the moon.

Out of dirt, and small rocks, and a stick. She has made a circle. She has put rocks in the circle, for the craters. She has put a stick in the middle, for — I don't know. For the flag, maybe. For the thing that is planted on the moon. She has made the moon, in the dirt, on the porch of the Tanaka house, on a Tuesday morning, ten years after the moon started falling.

"It's the moon," she says.

"I see that."

"It's big."

"It's very big."

"It's not falling."

"It's not falling."

"It stays."

"It stays."

"Mama."

"Yeah."

"Did the moon fall once?"

I look at her. She is three. She does not know. We have not told her. We will tell her, when she is older. We will tell her about the bench, and the road, and the flood, and the winter, and the cult, and the radio. We will tell her everything. But not yet. Not today.

"Yes," I say. "The moon fell once. A long time ago. Before you were born."

"Did it hurt?"

"Some people got hurt."

"Did you get hurt?"

"A little."

"Did Mama get hurt?"

"A little."

"Did the moon say sorry?"

I blink. "What?"

"Did the moon say sorry? For falling?"

I look at her. She is three. She is looking at me with the eyes — the stubborn eyes, the Shirase eyes, the eyes that want an answer. She wants to know if the moon said sorry. She wants to know if the moon apologized. She wants to know if the moon — the thing she just built, out of dirt, on the porch — is sorry.

I think about it.

I think about the moon. The moon that fell. The moon that killed people, that flooded cities, that broke the world. The moon that brought us the cult, and the winter, and the nothing. The moon that brought us to Sakae. The moon that brought us to each other. The moon that is, now, just the moon, just the thing in the sky, just the thing Hana builds out of dirt on a Tuesday morning.

"I don't think the moon can talk," I say.

"But did it say sorry?"

"I think — I think the moon stopped. I think the moon stopped falling. I think that was the moon's way of saying sorry. The moon couldn't talk, so the moon stopped."

"The moon stopped."

"The moon stopped."

"So the moon said sorry."

"Yes. The moon said sorry."

Hana considers this. She nods. She accepts it. She pats the dirt moon, gently, on the top, the way you pat a thing that has apologized.

"Good moon," she says.

And then she gets up, and she runs inside, and she yells, "Mama! Mama! The moon said sorry!" And I hear Shirase, inside, say, "What?" And Hana says, "The moon said sorry! For falling! Mama told me!" And Shirase says, "Did she." And Hana says, "Yes! The moon is good now!" And Shirase says, "The moon is good now."

And I sit on the porch, and I look at the dirt moon, with its craters and its stick, and I laugh.

I laugh the way I have not laughed in a long time. I laugh the way you laugh when your three-year-old has just forgiven the moon for the apocalypse. I laugh the way you laugh when the world, which has been broken for ten years, is suddenly whole again, because a child has decided it is.

The moon said sorry.

The moon is good now.

The world is okay.

I am going to stop writing now.

I am going to go inside, and I am going to kiss my wife, and I am going to pick up my daughter, and I am going to take them both to the kitchen, and I am going to make breakfast — rice, miso, tea, the things we have

every morning, the things that are the rhythm, the things that are the music.

We are going to eat breakfast.

We are going to eat breakfast, and the moon is going to set behind the mountains, and the sun is going to come up, and the village is going to wake up, and Tanaka Kenji is going to broadcast tonight, and the old man is going to pour sake this evening, and Obaa-chan is going to watch the moon from her porch, and Tendo is going to make a chair, and the world is going to keep being the world.

We are going to be alive.

We are going to be alive, and we are going to be stubborn, and we are going to be here, in the Tanaka house, in the village, in the mountains, under the moon that said sorry.

For as long as we are alive.

And we are going to be alive for a long time.

Because we are stubborn.

Because we are the most stubborn people in the history of Niigata Prefecture.

Because we are the most stubborn people in the history of the world.

Because the moon said sorry.

Because the moon is good now.

Because the world is okay.

Because we are here.

Because we are here.

Because we are here.

After Story I — The Beach Episode

(Shirase)

Yes, we did a beach episode.

I am aware that this is the apocalypse. I am aware that the moon fell and the coastlines changed and millions of people died and the world is broken. I am aware that beach episodes are, traditionally, a feature of light novels set in peaceful times, when the protagonists have nothing more pressing to do than go to the beach and eat watermelon and have a beach volleyball tournament that one of them takes way too seriously.

I am aware of all of this.

We did a beach episode anyway.

This is because Tanaka Kenji, in his infinite wisdom, suggested it.

He suggested it one Tuesday evening in July, three years after the moon stopped. We were sitting on the porch of the Tanaka house, drinking barley tea, watching the sun go down behind the mountains. Tanaka Kenji was visiting for the summer — he had not yet moved to Sakae permanently, this was the trial period — and he was, as he often did, talking about things that were technically not allowed.

"We should go to the beach," he said.

I choked on my tea.

"What?" Akari said.

"The beach. The ocean. The place where the water is. We should go."

"There is no beach," I said. "The beach is gone. The beach is underwater. The beach is one of the things the moon took."

"There are new beaches," Tanaka Kenji said. "The coastline changed. The water came in. But the water also went out, in some places. There are new beaches. The government has been surveying them. There's one — " he waved his hand vaguely northward — "about forty kilometers from here. Up the coast. New sand. Clean water. The survey team said it was nice."

"The survey team said it was nice," Akari repeated.

"The survey team said it was nice."

"And you want to go."

"I want to go."

"To the beach."

"To the beach."

"With us."

"With you. And Hana. And Boss."

"Boss."

"Boss needs sun."

"Boss does not need sun. Boss is a cat. Boss hates sun. Boss hates everything. Boss hates Sakae. Boss hates mountains. Boss will hate the beach."

"Boss needs to expand his horizons."

"Boss does not want to expand his horizons."

"Boss does not know what he wants."

"Boss knows exactly what he wants. Boss wants to sit on the wall and stare at Hana with contempt."

"That's a narrow life."

"That's a cat's life."

We went to the beach.

We went to the beach because Tanaka Kenji would not shut up about it, and because Akari, after three days of listening to him, said "fine, fine, we'll go to the beach, just stop talking about it," and because I, after four days of listening to both of them, said "okay, but if Boss poops in the car I'm not cleaning it up." We went to the beach. On a Tuesday, because Tuesdays were still ours, even with the streamer in tow.

The car was a government car. Tanaka Kenji had, somehow, acquired the use of a government car for the day. I did not ask how. I did not want to know. The car was small. The car was very small. The car was a kei car, the kind of car that is technically a car but is really more of a suggestion of a car, a small box on wheels that exists primarily to make you feel cramped.

We put ourselves in the car. Five of us — me, Akari, Hana, Tanaka Kenji, and Boss. Boss was in a carrier. Boss was not happy about the carrier. Boss expressed his displeasure with a low, continuous growl that

lasted the entire forty kilometers.

We also put things in the car. Towels. A cooler with rice balls and barley tea and the thermos of miso soup that Akari had insisted on, because Akari does not go anywhere without miso soup. A beach umbrella that Tanaka Kenji had borrowed from the village office. A bucket and a plastic shovel for Hana, purchased in Nagaoka the week before, because Hana had never seen the ocean and we did not know what she would do when she saw it.

We did not, despite Tanaka Kenji's repeated suggestions, bring swimsuits. We did not bring swimsuits because none of us owned swimsuits. Swimsuits were a thing of the past. Swimsuits were a thing the moon had taken, along with the coastlines and the convenience stores and the old Niigata. We had clothes. We had the clothes we wore every day. We were going to the beach in our clothes. This was fine. This was the kind of thing you accepted, in the world after the moon.

Hana, who was two at the time, did not know what the beach was. She had never seen the ocean. She had seen rivers. She had seen puddles. She had seen the bath. She had not seen the ocean. We had told her about the ocean. We had told her it was a big puddle. She had looked at us with the eyes — the stubborn eyes, the Shirase eyes — and she had said, "How big?"

"Very big," we had said.

"How very big?"

"Very, very big."

She had considered this. She had accepted it. She had not asked any more questions. She had waited to see for herself.

We drove north. The road was bad in places — the road had been bad in places since the moon, and the road had been patched, but the patches were not always good. The car bounced. Boss growled. Hana laughed. Hana thought the bouncing was hilarious. Hana thought everything was hilarious. Hana was two, and two-year-olds think everything is hilarious, even bad roads and growling cats.

We came over a hill, and there it was.

The ocean.

The new ocean. The ocean that had come in, that had taken the old coast, that had made new beaches where there had been fields and forests. The ocean was — the ocean was big. The ocean was very, very big. The ocean was the biggest puddle Hana had ever seen, and she said so.

"That's a big puddle," she said.

"That's the ocean," Akari said.

"It's a big puddle."

"It's the ocean."

"Puddle."

"Ocean."

"Puddle."

"Ocean."

"Puddle."

"Let it go, Akari," I said.

"But she should know the word."

"She knows the word. She's choosing not to use it."

"It's a puddle," Hana said, with finality.

We drove down to the beach. The beach was — the beach was nice. Tanaka Kenji had not been wrong. The beach was new sand, clean, white, the kind of sand that squeaks when you walk on it. The water was clear. The water was cold — very cold, because this was the Japan Sea coast and the Japan Sea is always cold — but it was clear. The sky was blue. The moon was up — the moon was always up, these days, the moon was just there, in the sky, the way it was — but it did not ruin the beach. The moon was just part of the beach now.

We parked. We got out. We carried our things to the sand. Tanaka Kenji set up the umbrella. Akari laid out the towels. I unpacked the cooler. Hana stood at the edge of the sand and looked at the water.

She looked at the water for a long time.

She did not move.

I crouched down next to her. "What is it?"

"It's big."

"It's big."

"It moves."

"It moves."

"Does it stop?"

"Sometimes. The waves come in and go out. They don't stop."

"Why?"

"I don't know. The moon makes them."

She looked at me. She looked at the moon, which was up in the sky. She looked at the water. She looked at me again.

"The moon makes the puddle move?"

"The moon makes the puddle move."

She considered this. She nodded. She accepted it. The moon made the puddle move. This was, to her, a reasonable state of affairs. The moon was up there. The puddle was down here. The moon moved the puddle. Fine.

She took off her shoes. She took off her socks. She walked to the water. She put one foot in.

She screamed.

She screamed because the water was cold. The water was very, very cold. The water was the Japan Sea in July, which is cold even in July, and Hana was two, and Hana had not expected cold. Hana had expected — I don't know what Hana had expected. Warmth, maybe. A puddle. The puddles she knew were warm. The bath was warm. This was not warm.

She screamed, and she pulled her foot out, and she looked at me with the eyes — the betrayed eyes, the *how could you do this to me* eyes — and she said, "It's cold."

"It's cold."

"It's cold, Mama."

"I know. It's the Japan Sea. It's always cold."

"Why?"

"I don't know why. It just is."

She considered this. She put her foot back in. She screamed again. She pulled it out. She put it back in. She screamed. She pulled it out. She put it back in. She screamed. She pulled it out.

This went on for about five minutes.

Then she stopped screaming. She had gotten used to it. She had decided that the cold was — acceptable. That the cold was a thing she could live with. That the puddle was cold, but the puddle was also fun, and the fun was worth the cold.

She walked in.

She walked in up to her ankles. She walked in up to her knees. She walked in up to her thighs. She stopped. She looked back at us. She was smiling. The wide, wet, sandy smile of a two-year-old who has just discovered the ocean.

"It's a puddle," she said, "but it's a good puddle."

She spent the next three hours in the puddle.

She would not come out. We tried. We tried to get her out for lunch. We tried to get her out for sunscreen. We tried to get her out for a nap. She would not come out. She was in the puddle. The puddle was hers. She had claimed it. She was not leaving.

Akari went in after her. Akari went in fully clothed, because we did not have swimsuits, because swimsuits were a thing of the past. Akari went in in her jeans and her t-shirt and she did not care. Akari went in and she picked Hana up and Hana screamed and kicked and said "no, no, puddle, no" and Akari said "you have to eat" and Hana said "no eat, puddle" and Akari said "eat then puddle" and Hana said "puddle then eat" and Akari said "eat then puddle" and Hana said "puddle then eat then puddle" and Akari said "fine, eat then puddle then we go home" and Hana said "deal."

They ate. On the beach. Rice balls and miso soup and barley tea. Hana ate with sandy hands. Sand got in the rice balls. Sand got in the miso soup. Sand got in the barley tea. Hana did not care. Hana ate the sand. Hana ate the rice. Hana ate everything. Hana was two, and two-year-olds will eat anything, including sand, including the apocalypse, including the entire ocean if you let them.

After lunch, Hana went back in the puddle.

Tanaka Kenji and I sat on the towels and watched.

"This was a good idea," Tanaka Kenji said.

"This was a tolerable idea."

"Admit it. This was a good idea."

"I admit nothing."

"You're smiling."

"I'm not smiling."

"You're smiling behind your hand. I can see it."

"Shut up."

"You're happy."

"I'm not happy. I'm adequate."

"You're happy and you're going to write about this in your notebook and you're going to cry about it later."

"I'm not going to cry about it."

"You're going to cry about it."

"I hate you."

"You love me."

"I tolerate you."

"That's the same thing."

"It is not the same thing."

"It is the same thing."

We sat there. We watched Hana in the puddle. We watched Akari in the puddle. We watched the waves come in and go out, the way they always did, the way the moon made them. We watched the moon, up in

the sky, huge and silver and still. We watched the sun go down behind the mountains.

Boss, who had been in the carrier the entire time, was allowed out. Boss walked three feet onto the sand, sat down, and began to clean himself with an expression of profound offense. Boss did not go near the water. Boss did not go near Hana. Boss sat on the sand and cleaned himself and pretended he was somewhere else.

"Boss hates the beach," I said.

"Boss hates everything."

"Boss hates us."

"Boss hates us. But Boss is here."

"Boss is here because we made him come."

"Boss is here because he loves us, deep down, in a place he will never admit exists."

"Boss does not love us."

"Boss loves us."

"Boss tolerates us."

"That's the same thing."

"It is not the same thing."

"It is the same thing."

We went home in the evening. Hana fell asleep in the car, sandy and

wet and exhausted and happy. Boss growled the entire way home, because Boss was Boss and Boss was always going to growl. Akari leaned against my shoulder, also sandy, also wet, also exhausted, also happy. Tanaka Kenji drove, badly, because Tanaka Kenji could not drive well, because Tanaka Kenji had spent the last four years not driving.

We went home. We bathed Hana. We bathed ourselves. We put Hana to bed. We sat on the porch, in the evening, and we drank barley tea, and we watched the moon come up over the mountains.

"Beach episode," Tanaka Kenji said.

"Beach episode," I said.

"We should do it again."

"We should do it again."

"Next summer."

"Next summer."

Akari, who had been quiet, said: "Next summer we should bring swimsuits."

"Where are we going to get swimsuits?" I said.

"I'll make them."

"You don't know how to make swimsuits."

"I'll learn."

"You'll learn to make swimsuits."

"I'll learn to make swimsuits. I'll make a spreadsheet."

"Not the spreadsheet."

"The spreadsheet."

"Akari —"

"The spreadsheet will have columns. Fabric. Pattern. Size. Color. The spreadsheet will be comprehensive."

"I hate spreadsheets."

"You married a spreadsheet."

"I married you. You are not a spreadsheet."

"I am a spreadsheet with legs."

"That is the worst thing you have ever said to me."

"You love me."

"I tolerate you."

"That's the same thing."

"It is not the same thing."

"It is the same thing."

We sat on the porch. We drank our tea. We watched the moon. Tanaka Kenji was already inside, broadcasting, because it was Tuesday, and Tuesday was his night. We could hear his voice, faintly, through the window. He was telling his listeners about the beach. He was telling them

about Hana and the puddle. He was telling them about Boss and the sand. He was telling them about us.

We sat on the porch. We held hands. We did not say anything for a while.

Then Akari said: "It was a good day."

"It was a good day."

"The beach was a good idea."

"The beach was a tolerable idea."

"You're smiling again."

"I'm not smiling."

"You're smiling."

"I'm smiling behind my hand. It doesn't count."

"It counts."

"It doesn't count."

"It counts."

We sat there. We held hands. The moon came up. The stars came out. The village was quiet. The world was okay.

We went to bed. We lay in the futon, side by side. We did not talk. We did not need to talk. The day had said everything.

We slept.

We slept the way you sleep after a beach day — deeply, completely, the sleep of people who have been in the sun and the water and the sand, the sleep of people who are tired in the good way, the way that means you did something.

We slept.

The next morning, Hana woke up and said, "Puddle."

We went back to the beach the next summer. And the summer after that. And the summer after that.

We never did get swimsuits. Akari never did make the spreadsheet. We went in our clothes, every year, because that was the way we did things, in the world after the moon. We went in our clothes, and we got wet, and we got sandy, and we ate rice balls with sand in them, and we were happy.

We were happy.

It was a beach episode.

We had earned it.

After Story II — The Cooking Contest

(Akari)

The cooking contest was Tendo's idea, which should have been our first warning.

It was a Sunday. We were at the temple, after the meal, the way we were every Sunday. The old man had poured sake. The children were running around. Tanaka Kenji was telling Hana a long and implausible story about a boss he had once fought that was, he claimed, "shaped like a potato." Hana was listening with the focus she usually reserved for the cat.

Tendo was sitting in the corner, on one of his own chairs — a particularly lopsided one that he had made the previous winter and that the old man had declared "the most Tendo chair of all the Tendo chairs." Tendo was drinking tea. Tendo was thinking. We could tell he was thinking because he was frowning at the wall, and Tendo only frowned at the wall when he was thinking.

"We should have a cooking contest," Tendo said.

The temple went quiet.

Not the dramatic kind of quiet. The kind of quiet where everyone stops what they are doing and looks at the person who has just spoken, because the person who has just spoken has said something that is either brilliant or terrible and nobody knows which.

"A cooking contest," the old man said.

"A cooking contest."

"Between whom?"

"Between Akari and Shirase."

I looked at Shirase. Shirase looked at me. We had the same expression. The expression that said: *this is going to be a disaster and we are going to do it anyway.*

"On what grounds?" I said.

"On the grounds that you are both — " Tendo waved his hand vaguely — "competitive."

"We are not competitive," Shirase said.

"You argued about canned coffee for three weeks."

"That was a matter of principle."

"You argued about whether video games are writing for two hours."

"That was a matter of taste."

"You argued about which yuri manga kiss was the best kiss for an entire evening."

"That was a matter of — "

"You are competitive. Admit it."

Shirase looked at me. I looked at Shirase. We both looked at Tendo.

"Fine," I said. "What are the rules?"

Tendo, who had clearly been thinking about this for some time, laid out the rules. Each contestant would make one dish. The dish would be made from the same set of ingredients, which Tendo would choose. The dish would be judged by a panel of three: the old man, Obaa-chan, and Tanaka Kenji. The winner would receive — Tendo paused for effect — bragging rights.

"Just bragging rights?" Shirase said.

"What else is there?"

"Money."

"We don't have money."

"Food."

"We don't have extra food."

"Then what's the point?"

"The point is honor."

"Honor is not a real thing."

"Honor is the only real thing."

Shirase looked at me. I looked at Shirase. We both looked at Tendo, who was, despite his lopsided chair and his tea and his years of cult-leading, completely serious.

"Fine," I said. "Fine. I accept."

"Fine," Shirase said. "I accept."

"Fine," Tendo said. "The contest will be held next Sunday. At the temple. The ingredients will be revealed the morning of."

He stood up. He bowed, slightly, in the way he had learned to bow since coming back to the village. He walked out of the temple. We watched him go.

"We should not have agreed to this," Shirase said.

"We should not have agreed to this."

"We are going to regret this."

"We are going to regret this."

"Are we really doing this?"

"We are really doing this."

"Okay."

"Okay."

The week leading up to the contest was — intense.

I should explain. I am, by nature, a competitive person. I am the daughter of a woman who made a spreadsheet for her daughter's entire life. I am the product of a childhood where grades were not grades, they were assessments, and assessments were not assessments, they were competitions, and competitions were not competitions, they were — well. I am competitive. I have always been competitive. The spreadsheet made me competitive. The bunker made me competitive. The apocalypse made me competitive. I am competitive about everything. I am competitive

about the dishes. I am competitive about the nails. I am competitive about the yuri manga. I am competitive about the canned coffee, which I am right about, and which Shirase is wrong about, and which I will prove I am right about, even if it takes the rest of my life.

Shirase is also competitive. Shirase is competitive in a different way — quieter, more stubborn, more — more Shirase. Shirase does not announce her competitiveness. Shirase does not posture. Shirase just — shows up. Shirase just — does the thing. And the thing is, somehow, always better than you expected. This is the most infuriating thing about Shirase. This is the thing that makes her the worst possible person to have a cooking contest with.

I spent the week practicing. I practiced in the kitchen of the Tanaka house, in the evenings, after Hana was asleep. I practiced with the ingredients I thought Tendo would choose — rice, miso, fish, vegetables, the basics, the things we had. I practiced my tamagoyaki, which is my best dish. I practiced my miso soup, which is better than Shirase's, although Shirase will not admit this. I practiced my grilled fish, which is — adequate. I practiced. I practiced. I practiced.

Shirase, as far as I could tell, did not practice.

This made me more nervous.

Shirase not practicing meant one of two things. Either she had given up, which was impossible, because Shirase did not give up. Or she was confident, which was worse, because Shirase confident meant Shirase had a plan, and Shirase with a plan was the most dangerous Shirase of all the Shirases.

Saturday night, I could not sleep. I lay in the futon next to Shirase, who was sleeping soundly, the way she always slept — on her side, facing me, her hand near my face, the small smile on her mouth that she had when she was dreaming. I lay there and I looked at her and I thought: *she is going to destroy me. She is going to make something so good that the judges weep. She is going to win, and she is going to be smug about it, and I am going to have to live with the smugness for the rest of my life.*

I got up. I went to the kitchen. I made tamagoyaki. At 2 AM. I made it three times. The third one was perfect. I ate it standing at the counter, in the dark, and I thought: *this is who I am now. A person who makes tamagoyaki at 2 AM because she is scared of losing a cooking contest to her wife.*

I went back to bed. I lay down. Shirase stirred. She did not wake up, but she turned toward me, and her hand found my wrist, and she held on. I lay there in the dark with her hand on my wrist and I thought: *it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter who wins. It doesn't matter. We are here. We are alive. We have a daughter. We have a village. We have each other. The cooking contest does not matter.*

This lasted about thirty seconds.

Then I thought: *I am absolutely going to win this cooking contest.*

Sunday morning. The temple. The ingredients.

Tendo had laid them out on a table in the middle of the temple. The ingredients were: rice, miso, one fish (a small river trout, caught that morning), one daikon, two carrots, three eggs, a block of tofu, a bunch of green onions, soy sauce, mirin, and a single sweet potato.

"You have two hours," Tendo said. "You may use any equipment in the temple kitchen. You may not use recipes. You may not consult each other. You may not consult anyone. Begin."

We began.

I will not describe the cooking in detail, because the cooking is not the point. The point is the thing that happened while we were cooking.

The thing that happened was: I could see Shirase.

We were in the same kitchen. The temple kitchen is not large. We were cooking side by side, at adjacent stations, close enough that I could hear her breathing, close enough that I could smell her, close enough that I could see, out of the corner of my eye, what she was doing.

She was not making tamagoyaki.

She was not making miso soup.

She was not making grilled fish.

She was making something else. She was making — I leaned over, trying to see. She was making curry. She was making curry with the sweet potato and the daikon and the carrots and the fish. She was making a sweet potato fish curry. She was making — I did not even know she knew how to make curry. I had never seen her make curry. She had never made curry in the years I had known her. She had never mentioned curry. She had never —

"Stop looking at my station," Shirase said, without looking up.

"I'm not looking at your station."

"You're looking at my station."

"I'm looking in your general direction."

"Your general direction is my station."

"It's a wide general direction."

"Stop looking."

"I'm not looking."

"You're looking."

I stopped looking. I focused on my own dish. My own dish was — I had decided, on the spot, to make something I had never made before. I had decided to make — I had decided to make the tamagoyaki, because the tamagoyaki was my best dish, but I had decided to make it differently. I had decided to stuff it. I had decided to stuff it with the tofu and the green onions and a little bit of the miso, to make a — a tamagoyaki roll. A stuffed tamagoyaki roll. I had never made this before. I had thought of it on Saturday night, at 2 AM, while making the third tamagoyaki. I had thought: *what if I stuff it*. I had not practiced it. I was making it up as I went.

This was, in retrospect, a mistake.

The first tamagoyaki roll fell apart. The tofu was too wet. The miso was too strong. The egg would not hold. It fell apart on the cutting board, a sad puddle of egg and tofu and miso, and I looked at it and I thought: *this is it. This is how I lose. I lose to a curry. A curry I didn't know she could make.*

I took a breath. I started over. I drained the tofu. I reduced the miso. I added a little soy sauce. I tried again. The second one held. It was not pretty. It was lopsided. It was — it was the Tendo chair of tamagoyaki rolls. But it held.

Time was called.

We presented our dishes to the judges. The judges sat at the table. The old man. Obaa-chan. Tanaka Kenji. They looked at the dishes.

The old man looked at my tamagoyaki roll. He looked at Shirase's curry. He looked at me. He looked at Shirase. He looked at the dishes again.

He ate.

He ate my tamagoyaki roll first. He chewed slowly. He nodded, slightly. He did not say anything. He ate Shirase's curry. He chewed slowly. He nodded, slightly. He did not say anything.

Obaa-chan ate. Obaa-chan chewed. Obaa-chan nodded. Obaa-chan did not say anything.

Tanaka Kenji ate. Tanaka Kenji chewed. Tanaka Kenji — Tanaka Kenji's eyes went wide. Tanaka Kenji looked at the curry. He looked at Shirase. He looked at the curry again. He ate more. He ate a lot more. He ate until the bowl was empty. He put the bowl down. He looked at the old man.

"The curry," he said.

The old man looked at him.

"The curry," Tanaka Kenji said again. "The curry is — " He stopped. He

wiped his eyes. He had cried. Tanaka Kenji had cried at the curry. "The curry is the best thing I have eaten in five years."

The temple went quiet.

I looked at Shirase. Shirase was looking at the floor. She was — she was not smiling. She was not gloating. She was — she was embarrassed. Shirase was embarrassed because someone had said her cooking was good. Shirase, who had spent her whole life being told she was inadequate, who had spent her whole life believing it, who had spent her whole life making food that was "adequate" — Shirase was embarrassed because someone had said her food was the best thing they had eaten in five years.

I looked at her, and I felt the thing — the love thing, the big thing, the thing that I felt every morning when I watched her sleep, the thing that I felt every night when she held my wrist in the dark. I felt it, and I thought: *I lost. I lost the cooking contest. And I don't care. I don't care at all. Because Shirase is embarrassed because someone said her cooking is good, and that is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and I would lose a thousand cooking contests to see it.*

"The winner," the old man said, "is Shirase."

The temple clapped. The children clapped. Hana clapped, although she did not know what she was clapping for. Tanaka Kenji clapped. Obaa-chan clapped. Tendo clapped. I clapped.

Shirase looked up. She looked at me. Her eyes were wet. She was — she was trying not to cry. She was trying very hard not to cry. She was failing.

"How?" I said. "How did you — when did you learn to make curry? You've never made curry. I've never seen you make curry."

Shirase looked at the floor. She looked at her hands. She looked at the curry. She looked at me.

"I practiced," she said.

"You practiced?"

"I practiced. At the old man's house. After you went to bed. For three weeks. He taught me. His mother's recipe. Sweet potato and fish curry. He said — he said his mother used to make it. He said — he said it was the best thing she made. He said — he said he wanted someone to know how to make it. He said — he said he wanted the recipe to live. He said — he said I should learn it. So I learned it."

I stared at her.

"You learned the old man's mother's curry recipe."

"Yes."

"In secret."

"Yes."

"For three weeks."

"Yes."

"Because the old man asked you to."

"Yes."

"And you didn't tell me."

"I couldn't tell you. It was a secret. The old man didn't want anyone to know. He wanted — he wanted it to be a surprise. He wanted — " She stopped. She looked at the old man. The old man was looking at her. The old man was — the old man was crying. The old man, who was seventy years old and had not cried in front of anyone as far as I knew, was crying. He was crying quietly, the way Shirase cried, the way I had learned to cry. He was crying because his mother's curry was being eaten, and someone had learned to make it, and the recipe was going to live.

I started crying too.

I started crying, in the temple, in front of everyone, because my wife had spent three weeks secretly learning an old man's mother's curry recipe so that the recipe would not die, and the old man was crying, and Tanaka Kenji was crying, and everyone was crying, and the curry was the best thing anyone had eaten in five years, and I had lost, and I did not care, and I had never been happier in my entire life.

"You won," I said.

"I won."

"You're going to be smug about this."

"I'm going to be smug about this."

"For the rest of our lives."

"For the rest of our lives."

"I hate you."

"You love me."

"I tolerate you."

"That's the same thing."

"It is not the same thing."

"It is the same thing."

We went home. We put Hana to bed. We sat on the porch, in the evening, and we drank barley tea, and we watched the moon come up.

"How did it taste?" I said.

"What?"

"The curry. I didn't get to taste it. How did it taste?"

Shirase was quiet for a moment. Then she said: "It tasted like someone's mother. It tasted like — I don't know. It tasted like a kitchen I've never been in. It tasted like — it tasted like the kind of mother I didn't have. The kind who makes curry. The kind who — " She stopped. She was crying again. Quietly. The way she cried.

I put my arm around her. She leaned into me. We sat there, on the porch, in the evening, and we did not say anything for a while.

"You should teach me," I said.

"Teach you what?"

"The curry. You should teach me the curry. So I can make it too. So the recipe has two people. So if — if something happens to one of us — the

other one can make it."

She looked at me. She was still crying. She was also — she was also smiling. The small smile. The smile that was only for me.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay."

"I'll teach you."

"You'll teach me."

"It's hard."

"I'm stubborn."

"You're stubborn."

"I'll learn."

"You'll learn."

"And then I'll beat you next year."

"You will not beat me next year."

"I will beat you next year."

"You will not. I will think of something else. I will learn another secret recipe. I will — I will learn to make — I don't know. I will learn to make bread. The bakery. The one in Kichijoji. I will find the recipe. I will learn it. I will — "

"You will never stop competing."

"I will never stop competing."

"And I will never stop competing."

"And you will never stop competing."

"And we will do this every year."

"And we will do this every year."

"And the village will judge."

"And the village will judge."

"And Tanaka Kenji will cry."

"And Tanaka Kenji will cry."

"Okay."

"Okay."

We sat there. We held hands. The moon came up. The village was quiet.

We had lost the cooking contest, both of us, in a way — I had lost to the curry, and Shirase had lost to the old man's mother, and the old man had lost to the past, and Tanaka Kenji had lost to the curry, and we had all lost to the thing that the cooking contest was actually about, which was: the recipes that survive. The kitchens that survive. The mothers that survive, in the food they taught someone to make.

The cooking contest was a disaster.

The cooking contest was perfect.

We did it again the next year. And the year after that. And the year after that.

Tanaka Kenji cried every time.

We never did figure out who actually won.

After Story III — The Drunk Streamer

(Shirase)

The incident, as we later took to calling it, occurred on a Saturday in November.

Tanaka Kenji had been living in Sakae for about a year. He had settled in. He had his room. He had his radio. He had his cat. He had his routine — broadcast on Tuesdays, help at the school on Wednesdays and Fridays, carry things badly on Thursdays, sit on the porch and look at the mountains on Saturdays. He was, by all accounts, content. He was, by all accounts, fine.

He was not, however, immune to sake.

The old man had been introducing him to sake. This was the old man's project — every evening, the old man would pour a small cup for Tanaka Kenji, and Tanaka Kenji would drink it, and the old man would nod, and Tanaka Kenji would nod, and this was the extent of the ritual. The old man was teaching Tanaka Kenji about sake the way the old man taught anyone about anything — slowly, patiently, through the act of doing it. Tanaka Kenji had been a quick study. Tanaka Kenji had, it turned out, a talent for sake. Tanaka Kenji had, it turned out, the alcohol tolerance of a small child.

This was a problem.

This became a problem on a Saturday in November, when the old man — for reasons known only to himself — brought out the good sake. Not the daily sake. The good sake. The sake he had been saving, he said, for a

special occasion. The occasion, as far as we could tell, was that it was November and the old man felt like drinking the good sake. This was, in the old man's view, occasion enough.

We were at the temple. The usual Sunday crowd, except it was Saturday, because the old man had decided to move the gathering to Saturday, because he wanted to drink the good sake on Saturday and not Sunday, because — I don't know. Because the old man. Because the old man did things like this. Because the old man had decided that the good sake was a Saturday sake and that was the end of it.

Tanaka Kenji had three cups.

Three cups of the good sake. The good sake was, apparently, very good. The good sake was, apparently, very strong. The good sake was, apparently, the kind of sake that hits you about twenty minutes after you drink it, so you don't realize how drunk you are until you try to stand up and discover that standing up is no longer a thing you can do.

Tanaka Kenji discovered this at approximately 8 PM.

He had been sitting at the table, talking to Tendo about — I don't know. Wood. Chairs. The dungeon. Whatever Tanaka Kenji and Tendo talked about. He had been sitting, and he had been talking, and then he had decided to get more rice, and he had stood up, and he had immediately sat back down, except that the chair was no longer where he had left it, and he had sat down on the floor instead.

He looked at the floor. He looked at the chair. He looked at the floor again.

"The chair moved," he said.

"The chair did not move," Tendo said.

"The chair moved. It was there. Now it is not there. It moved."

"You moved. The chair stayed."

"I did not move. I stood up. Standing up is not moving. Standing up is the opposite of moving. The chair moved."

"Tanaka-san —"

"The chair is alive. The chair is against me. The chair has been against me since I came to this village. Your chairs are all against me. They are all lopsided. They are all trying to kill me. This is a plot."

"Tanaka-san."

"A plot, Tendo. A plot of chairs."

Akari and I, who had been sitting across the table, looked at each other. We had the same thought at the same time, which was: *oh no*.

Tanaka Kenji had never been drunk before. Not in Sakae. Not that we had seen. He had been careful. He had been restrained. He had been the kind of drinker who has one cup and stops, because he knows — he had said, once, offhand — that he is a lightweight, that he does not hold liquor well, that he should not drink more than one cup. He had said this. He had been careful. Until tonight.

Tonight, the good sake had been too good.

We got him off the floor. We got him back into the chair — the chair

that had allegedly moved, the chair that was allegedly part of a plot. We poured him water. We made him drink the water. He drank the water. He looked at the water. He looked at us.

"I am drunk," he said.

"You are drunk."

"I am very drunk."

"You are very drunk."

"I am too old to be this drunk."

"You are too old to be this drunk."

"I should go home."

"You should not go home. You cannot walk."

"I can walk."

"You cannot walk. You sat on the floor ten minutes ago because the chair moved."

"The chair did move."

"The chair did not move."

"The chair — "

"The chair did not move, Tanaka-san."

He looked at me. He looked at Akari. He looked at Tendo. He looked at the chair. He looked at the floor. He looked at the ceiling. He looked at

the moon, which was visible through the window, huge and silver and still.

"The moon is very big," he said.

"The moon is very big."

"The moon used to be smaller."

"The moon used to be further away."

"The moon was further away. Then the moon came closer. Then the moon stopped. The moon is just there now. The moon is just — sitting there. Like a — like a — " He waved his hand. "Like a cat. The moon is like a cat. The moon sits there. The moon does nothing. The moon judges us."

"The moon judges us."

"The moon is judging me right now. The moon is saying: *Tanaka Kenji, you are forty-two years old and you are drunk on sake in a temple in the mountains and you cannot walk and you are being scolded by two women and a man who makes lopsided chairs.* The moon is saying: *Tanaka Kenji, you are a disappointment*."

"The moon is not saying that."

"The moon is. I can hear it. The moon is talking to me."

"The moon is not talking to you."

"The moon is. The moon says — " He leaned in, conspiratorially. "The moon says *Tanaka Kenji, you should tell them. Tell them the thing. The thing you have not told them. Tell them now, while you are drunk, because drunk is*

the only way you will tell them."

I looked at Akari. Akari looked at me. We had the same thought, which was: *oh no, what thing.*

"What thing?" I said.

Tanaka Kenji leaned back. He looked at the ceiling. He looked at the moon. He looked at us.

"The thing," he said. "The — the dungeon thing. The — the real dungeon. Not the game. The — the real one."

"There is no real dungeon, Tanaka-san."

"There is. There is a real dungeon. I — I have been in it. For six years. The dungeon — the dungeon was not a game. The dungeon was — the dungeon was my life. The dungeon was — " He stopped. He wiped his eyes. He was crying. Tanaka Kenji, who cried easily, was crying. "The dungeon was the thing I did instead of — instead of living. Instead of — instead of being a person. The dungeon was — the dungeon was where I hid. When — when my wife died. When — when my daughter died. When — when — "

The temple went quiet.

I had not known Tanaka Kenji had a wife. I had not known he had a daughter. He had never said. He had never — in all the letters, in all the broadcasts, in all the years — he had never mentioned them.

"They died," he said. "Before the moon. Three years before the moon. Car accident. On the highway. Outside Sapporo. They were — my wife

was driving. My daughter was in the back. They were going to — I don't remember where they were going. The store. School. I don't remember. They were going somewhere and they did not come back."

He was crying. He was not wiping his eyes anymore. He was just crying.

"The dungeon — the dungeon was — I started playing the dungeon after. Because — because the dungeon did not end. The dungeon — the dungeon was always there. The dungeon did not — the dungeon did not die. The dungeon did not leave. The dungeon was — the dungeon was the thing that stayed. And I — I played it. For six years. I played it because — because as long as I was playing it, I was not — I was not in the world. I was in the dungeon. And in the dungeon, they were not dead. In the dungeon, they were — they were still — "

He stopped. He could not talk. He was crying too hard.

Akari moved. She went to him. She put her arms around him. She held him the way she held me, the way she held Hana, the way she held everyone she loved. She held him and she did not say anything, because there was nothing to say, because the thing he had said was too big for words.

I went to him too. I put my hand on his shoulder. His shoulder was — his shoulder was thin. His shoulder was the shoulder of a man who had not eaten enough for years, who had not slept enough for years, who had spent six years in a dungeon because the dungeon was the only place where his wife and daughter were still alive.

Tendo went to him. Tendo, who had been a cult leader, who had been

broken and put back together, who made lopsided chairs — Tendo went to him and put his hand on Tanaka Kenji's other shoulder. Tendo, who knew what it was to hide in a thing — to hide in a cult, to hide in a dungeon — Tendo held on.

We held him.

We held him in the temple, in the evening, in November, while the sake sat on the table and the moon sat in the sky and the cat sat on the wall outside. We held him and we did not say anything and we let him cry.

He cried for a long time.

Then he stopped. He wiped his face. He looked at us. He looked at the ceiling. He looked at the moon.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't apologize," Akari said.

"I'm — I should have — I should have told you. Before. I should have — "

"You told us when you were ready."

"I told you because I was drunk."

"You told us because you were ready. The sake just helped."

He laughed. A small, wet laugh. "The sake helped."

"The sake helped."

He looked at us. He looked at me. He looked at Akari. He looked at

Tendo. He looked at the temple, with its pine branches and its newspaper moons and its lopsided chairs.

"I lived in the dungeon for six years," he said. "And then I came here. And the dungeon — the dungeon ended. The dungeon — the dungeon was not — the dungeon was not the thing anymore. The thing was — the thing was the radio. The thing was the letters. The thing was — the thing was you. The thing was — the thing was being here. The thing was — " He stopped. He looked at the floor. "The thing was being alive."

"You're alive," I said.

"I'm alive."

"You're here."

"I'm here."

"You're our friend."

"You're my friend."

"And the dungeon — "

"The dungeon is over."

"The dungeon is over."

"And the wife and daughter — "

He looked up. He looked at me. He looked at me with the eyes — the eyes that I knew, the eyes that Shirase had had on the bench, the eyes that I had had in the karaoke box, the eyes that meant *I am here and I am not nothing*.

"They are — they are still dead," he said. "They are still gone. But — but I am not in the dungeon anymore. I am here. I am — I am here, with you. And — and that is — that is — "

"That is enough," Akari said.

"That is enough."

"That is more than enough."

"That is more than enough."

He cried a little more. We held him a little more. Then he stopped crying, and we stopped holding, and we sat at the table and we drank water and we ate rice and we did not talk about it anymore.

The next morning, Tanaka Kenji did not remember most of it. He remembered the chair. He remembered the moon. He did not remember the wife and daughter. Or he did remember, but he pretended not to, because he was embarrassed.

We did not push.

We did not push because we knew — we knew that he had told us, that the telling was the thing, that the telling had been the point. We knew that he did not need to tell us again. We knew that the knowing was enough. We knew that he was our friend, and that our friend had been in a dungeon for six years, and that our friend had a wife and daughter who had died, and that our friend was here now, with us, in the village, in the mountains, under the moon. And we loved him. And we did not need to say it. And we did not need him to say it again.

He knew.

We knew.

That was enough.

He never got that drunk again. He still drank sake with the old man, every evening, but he drank one cup. Just one. He had learned his limit. He had learned what the sake could do. He had learned that the sake could make him say the thing, and that the saying was good, but that he did not need the sake to say it. He could say it sober, if he wanted. He could say it whenever he wanted. He could say it because he was our friend, and friends said things, and the saying was the thing.

He did not say it again. He did not need to. We knew.

But every November, on the Saturday, the old man would bring out the good sake. And Tanaka Kenji would have one cup. And he would look at the moon. And he would smile. The small smile. The smile that meant: *I remember. I remember the dungeon. I remember the wife and daughter. I remember the being alone. And I remember the being here. And the being here is better.*

That was the incident.

That was the thing that happened.

The streamer got drunk and told us about his wife and daughter, and we held him, and the next morning he did not remember, and we did not push, and we loved him, and he knew, and that was enough.

That was the thing.

That was the thing that the after story is for.

After Story IV — The Wardrobe

(Akari)

The incident with the wardrobe occurred in March of the fifth year.

I should explain. I have, since I was sixteen, had an eye for outfits. This is not bragging. This is fact. I can look at a person and know, within about three seconds, what they should be wearing. I can look at a person and know what is wrong with what they are wearing. I can look at a person and know what would make them look — not good, exactly. Right. I can look at a person and know what would make them look like themselves.

This is a talent. This is the talent my mother did not have. This is the talent the spreadsheet did not account for. This is the talent that is mine, that has always been mine, that I have been honing since I was thirteen and dyed my hair and started wearing jirai kei and learned that clothes are not just clothes — clothes are the thing you say about yourself before you open your mouth.

I had never dressed Shirase.

This was not for lack of wanting. This was because Shirase would not let me. Shirase wore — Shirase wore the same thing. Every day. Jeans. A hoodie. Sneakers. The same jeans. The same hoodie. The same sneakers. She had other clothes — I had bought her other clothes, over the years, hoping she would wear them. She did not wear them. She wore the jeans and the hoodie and the sneakers, and when I suggested she try something else, she looked at me with the eyes — the stubborn eyes — and said, "No."

Just "no." Not "no, thank you." Not "no, I don't think so." Just "no." The way you say "no" to a thing that is not even worth considering.

I had been trying for years.

In March of the fifth year, I decided to try one more time. I decided to try one more time because Tanaka Kenji — who had moved to Sakae and who had, in his quiet way, become my co-conspirator in matters of Shirase — had brought me something. He had brought me, on a trip to Nagaoka, a piece of fabric. A nice piece of fabric. Dark blue, with white waves. The same pattern as the yukata I had found for Shirase, for the festival, all those years ago. But this was not yukata fabric. This was — this was dress fabric. This was the kind of fabric you make a dress out of. A nice dress. A dress for a woman who does not wear dresses but who would, I had decided, wear this one.

"I saw it," Tanaka Kenji said, handing it to me. "I thought of Shirase."

"You thought of Shirase."

"I thought of what Shirase would look like in it."

"And what would Shirase look like in it?"

"Beautiful."

I looked at him. He looked at me. We had the same thought, which was: *we are going to try to dress Shirase, and Shirase is going to kill us, and it is going to be worth it.*

"Okay," I said.

"Okay."

"I'll make the dress."

"You'll make the dress."

"I'll make a spreadsheet."

He looked at me. "A spreadsheet?"

"A spreadsheet. With measurements. And fabric calculations. And — "

"Akari. You cannot make a spreadsheet for a dress."

"I can make a spreadsheet for anything."

"You cannot make a spreadsheet for a dress."

"Watch me."

I made the spreadsheet. The spreadsheet had columns: Measurement, Value, Fabric Required, Pattern Piece, Cutting Order, Sewing Order, Notes. The spreadsheet was comprehensive. The spreadsheet was, I will admit, possibly excessive. The spreadsheet was, however, mine, and I was proud of it.

I made the dress. It took two weeks. I made it in the evenings, after Hana was asleep, with the lamp and the sewing kit and the fabric Tanaka Kenji had brought. I made it carefully. I made it the way my mother had taught me to make things — slowly, precisely, with attention to the details that nobody would see but that I would know were there. I made the dress. I made it for Shirase.

Then I had to get Shirase to wear it.

This was the hard part.

I waited for a Saturday. Saturdays were the day Shirase did not do much. Saturdays were the day Shirase sat on the porch and read and drank tea and was — available. Saturdays were the day Shirase was most likely to say yes, because Saturdays were the day Shirase was most relaxed.

I waited for a Saturday. I waited for Hana to go down for her nap. I waited for Tanaka Kenji to take his radio to his room and start fiddling with it, which he did every Saturday afternoon, because Tanaka Kenji's relationship with that radio was, frankly, more involved than most marriages. I waited for the house to be quiet. Then I went to Shirase.

She was on the porch. Reading. The yuri manga from Nagoya, the monthly one. She was frowning at it, which meant she was enjoying it.

"Shirase."

"Mm."

"I have a thing."

"Mm."

"A thing for you to try."

"Mm."

"Shirase."

She looked up. She saw my face. She saw the thing in my face — the determination, the conspiracy, the *I am about to ask you to do something you will not want to do.* She put the manga down.

"No," she said.

"You don't know what I'm going to ask."

"I know what you're going to ask. You're going to ask me to try on a thing. The answer is no."

"It's a dress."

"The answer is no."

"It's a nice dress."

"The answer is no."

"It's the same fabric as the yukata. The one from the festival. The one you liked."

"I didn't like it. I tolerated it."

"You liked it."

"I tolerated it."

"You smiled when you put it on."

"I did not smile."

"You smiled behind your hand. I saw it."

"You saw nothing."

"I saw it. You smiled. You liked the yukata. You will like the dress."

"I will not like the dress."

"You will."

"I will not."

"You will."

"Akari — "

"Please."

She stopped. She looked at me. The *please* had gotten her. The *please* always got her. I did not use it often. I saved it. I used it when I needed it. I needed it now.

"Please," I said. "Just try it on. If you don't like it, you don't have to wear it. If you don't like it, I will never ask again. I will burn the dress. I will burn the spreadsheet. I will never mention it again. Just — try it on. For me. Please."

She looked at me for a long time. She looked at me with the eyes — the stubborn eyes, the *I am going to say no* eyes. Then she sighed. The sigh of a person who has been defeated by a *please*.

"Fine," she said.

"Fine?"

"Fine. I'll try it on. Once. If I don't like it — "

"You never have to wear it again."

"I never have to wear it again."

"And you'll burn the spreadsheet."

"I will not burn the spreadsheet. The spreadsheet is a work of art. The spreadsheet is going in the archive."

"The spreadsheet is not going in the archive."

"The spreadsheet is going in the archive."

"Akari —"

"The spreadsheet is going in the archive, Shirase. The spreadsheet is going in the archive alongside the yuri manga and the cat card and the recipe for the old man's mother's curry. The spreadsheet is part of the record. The spreadsheet is part of us."

She stared at me.

"You're serious."

"I'm serious."

"You want to keep the spreadsheet."

"I want to keep the spreadsheet."

"For — for posterity."

"For posterity. For Hana. For — I don't know. For the village. For the future. So that someone, someday, can look at the spreadsheet and say: *Akari made this. Akari made a spreadsheet for a dress she made for her wife. Akari was a person who made spreadsheets for things, because that was who she was, and that was okay, and that was — that was love.*"

Shirase looked at me for a long time. Then she said: "You're a very strange person."

"I know."

"I love you."

"I know."

"Give me the dress."

I gave her the dress. She took it. She looked at it. She held it up. She looked at the fabric — the dark blue, the white waves, the pattern that matched the yukata. She looked at the sewing — the seams, the hem, the details that nobody would see but that I knew were there. She looked at me.

"You made this," she said.

"I made this."

"In two weeks."

"In two weeks."

"At night. After Hana was asleep."

"After Hana was asleep."

"With a spreadsheet."

"With a spreadsheet."

She looked at the dress. She looked at me. She looked at the dress again. Then she went inside.

She came back ten minutes later.

She was wearing the dress.

The dress fit. The dress fit because I had measured her, in her sleep, with a tape measure, like a strange person, because that was who I was. The dress fit perfectly. The dark blue was good against her skin. The white waves moved when she moved. The dress was — the dress was right. The dress was the thing I had known it would be. The dress was Shirase, but the Shirase that Shirase did not let people see.

She stood on the porch. She did not say anything. She looked at the floor. She looked at the railing. She looked at the mountains. She did not look at me.

"Well?" I said.

She did not say anything for a long time.

Then she said: "I look like a person."

"You look like a person."

"I look like — I look like the kind of person who wears dresses."

"You look like the kind of person who wears dresses."

"I am not the kind of person who wears dresses."

"You are today."

She looked at me. Her eyes were wet. She was — she was crying. Quietly. The way she cried. She was crying because — I don't know. Because the dress fit. Because the dress was right. Because someone had made her a dress, with a spreadsheet, in two weeks, and the dress made

her look like a person, and she had not known she could look like a person. She had not known she was allowed.

"Akari," she said.

"Yeah."

"It's beautiful."

"You're beautiful."

"I'm not —"

"You're beautiful. You've always been beautiful. You've never known it. I've been trying to tell you for ten years. You don't listen. So I made you a dress. The dress tells you. The dress says it for me."

She looked at me. She was still crying. She was also — she was also smiling. The small smile. The smile that was only for me.

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome."

"I'm going to wear it."

"You're going to wear it?"

"I'm going to wear it. Today. Right now. To the temple. To the old man. To everyone. I'm going to wear it and I'm going to let them see me in it and I'm going to — I don't know. I'm going to be the kind of person who wears dresses. For today. Just for today."

"Just for today."

"Just for today."

"Okay."

"Okay."

She wore the dress to the temple that evening. The old man saw her and said nothing, but he poured her an extra cup of sake. Obaa-chan saw her and said, "About time." Tendo saw her and nodded, slowly, the way Tendo nodded at things that mattered. Tanaka Kenji saw her and cried, because Tanaka Kenji cried at everything, and because he had brought the fabric, and because the dress was — the dress was right.

Hana saw her and said, "Mama pretty."

Shirase looked at Hana. She looked at me. She looked at the dress. She looked at the moon, which was coming up over the mountains, huge and silver and still.

"Mama pretty," Hana said again.

"Yeah," Shirase said. "Mama pretty."

She wore the dress home. She took it off, carefully, the way you take off a thing that is precious. She hung it on the hook by the door. She looked at it.

"I'm not wearing it tomorrow," she said.

"I know."

"I'm wearing the jeans tomorrow."

"I know."

"But I'll wear it again."

"You'll wear it again."

"For you."

"For me."

"For — for me, too. For — I don't know. For the person I could have been. If — if things had been different. If my mother had been different. If the kitchen had been different. If — I don't know. For the person in the dress."

"The person in the dress is you."

"The person in the dress is me."

"It's always been you."

"It's always been me."

"Okay."

"Okay."

We went to bed. We lay in the futon, side by side. We did not talk. The dress was on the hook by the door, in the moonlight, the dark blue and the white waves. The dress was there. The dress was ours.

The next morning, Shirase put on the jeans.

But the dress stayed on the hook.

And every now and then — once a month, maybe, on a Sunday, on a Tuesday, on a day when the mood was right — Shirase would take the

dress down and put it on and we would walk to the temple and the village would see her and the village would nod and the village would not say anything, because the village knew, the way villages know things, that the dress was the thing. That the dress was the love. That the dress was the thing I had made for her, with a spreadsheet, in two weeks, because that was who I was, and that was okay, and that was — that was love.

The dress was love.

The dress was always love.

After Story V — The Jealousy

(Shirase)

The jealousy incident occurred in June of the sixth year.

I should preface this by saying: I am not a jealous person. I am not. I am the most secure person in the world. I am the most secure person in the history of the world. I am married to Sakai Akari, who is the most beautiful woman in Niigata Prefecture and possibly in Japan, who is also the most stubborn woman in Niigata Prefecture and definitely in Japan, who has been my wife for four years and my friend for seven and my person for ten. I am secure. I do not get jealous.

I did not get jealous.

I want to be very clear about this.

What happened was: a man came to the village.

His name was — it doesn't matter. His name was Yamamoto. He was from the government. He was a surveyor. He had come to Sakae to survey the forestry road, which the government was planning to repair, because the government was finally getting around to repairing things in the mountains, because the government had finally noticed that there were people in the mountains who needed roads.

Yamamoto was — Yamamoto was tall. Yamamoto was young. Yamamoto was maybe twenty-eight. Yamamoto had the kind of face that — I don't know. The kind of face that women apparently liked. I did not like it. I did not have an opinion about it. I was married. I did not notice

faces.

Yamamoto came to the village. Yamamoto stayed for a week. Yamamoto surveyed the road. Yamamoto also — and this is the part — Yamamoto also met Akari.

Akari was in the fields when Yamamoto arrived. She was wearing — she was wearing the jeans and the t-shirt and the boots. She was wearing the hat, the broad-brimmed hat she wore in the fields, the one that kept the sun off. She was wearing the gloves. She was, by any objective measure, dressed for farming and not for meeting strangers.

Yamamoto did not seem to notice this.

Yamamoto met Akari at the gate. I was not there. I was at the school, teaching the children about the moon. I heard about it later, from Tendo, who had been at the gate, who had watched the whole thing.

Yamamoto, according to Tendo, had shaken Akari's hand. Yamamoto had held on to Akari's hand for slightly too long. Yamamoto had said — and here Tendo did an impression of Yamamoto, which was unflattering but, I suspected, accurate — Yamamoto had said: "I didn't expect to find someone like you in a place like this."

Tendo had not told me this to make me jealous. Tendo had told me this because Tendo was Tendo, and Tendo told me things, and Tendo had noticed the hand, and Tendo had noticed the comment, and Tendo had decided, in his quiet Tendo way, that I should know.

I did not react.

I did not react because I am not a jealous person.

I did not react for the rest of the afternoon. I did not react at dinner. I did not react when Akari came home and told me, herself, about the surveyor. I did not react when she said, offhand, "He was nice." I did not react when she said, offhand, "He asked a lot of questions about the village." I did not react when she said, offhand, "He's staying at the temple with the old man." I did not react.

I did not react for three days.

On the fourth day, I reacted.

The reaction took the form of: I went to the temple.

I went to the temple at lunchtime. I did not usually go to the temple at lunchtime. I went at lunchtime because I knew, from Akari, that Yamamoto took his lunch at the temple, because the old man had invited him to take his meals there, because the old man was hospitable to strangers, because the old man was the old man.

I went to the temple. I walked in. Yamamoto was there, eating rice and miso at the table. He looked up when I walked in. He smiled.

"Hello," he said. "You must be Shirase. Akari-san has told me about you."

I looked at him. I looked at him the way I looked at salarymen on the train, the way I had learned to look at people who were in my way. I looked at him with the eyes. The eyes that said: *I am here. I am not leaving. You are in my way.*

He was not, technically, in my way. He was eating rice. He was a surveyor. He was doing his job. He had done nothing wrong. He had held

Akari's hand for slightly too long. He had said a thing that was, objectively, just a thing, a polite thing, a thing that surveyors said to women in fields.

But I was there. And I was looking at him. And he was going to know it.

"Sit down," he said, because he was apparently an idiot. "Have some rice."

"I'm not hungry."

"Are you sure? It's good rice."

"I'm sure."

"You look like you could eat."

"I look like I could kill you."

He blinked. "What?"

"I said, I look like I could kill you. With my bare hands. Right now. In this temple. And nobody would stop me. The old man would not stop me. He would probably help me. Tendo would definitely help me. Tanaka Kenji would not help me but he would not stop me either, because Tanaka Kenji does not get involved in physical confrontations, he just cries about them afterward."

Yamamoto stared at me.

"I — what?"

"I want you to understand something, Yamamoto-san."

"What?"

"Akari is my wife."

"I — I know. She told me."

"Akari is my wife. She has been my wife for four years. She has been my person for ten. She is the most important thing in my life. She is more important than the moon. She is more important than the village. She is more important than — than anything. She is mine. I am hers. This is not — this is not a thing that you can — "

I stopped. I was — I was doing a thing. I was doing a thing that I had not intended to do. I was doing a thing that was, frankly, embarrassing. I was threatening a surveyor in a temple over a handhold that had lasted slightly too long. I was being — I was being jealous. I was being jealous, and I was being jealous badly, and I was being jealous in a way that was, frankly, ridiculous.

I took a breath.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You're — what?"

"I'm sorry. That was — that was uncalled for. That was — I don't know what that was. I am not — I am not a jealous person. I am not. I have never been. I am — I don't know what I am. I am — I think I am having a feeling. I am having a feeling that I do not know how to have. I am — "

I stopped again. I was — I was not making sense. I was not making sense because the feeling was — the feeling was bigger than I had

expected. The feeling was — I had not known. I had not known I was jealous. I had not known I was capable of being jealous. I had not known that the hand, the comment, the "he was nice" — I had not known that these things had been building, in me, for three days, into a thing that was now coming out of my mouth in a temple in front of a surveyor who was, by all accounts, just a guy doing his job.

"I think you should leave," Yamamoto said, carefully.

"I think I should leave."

"Please."

"Okay."

I turned to go. The old man was at the door. The old man had been there the whole time. The old man had heard everything. The old man was — the old man was smiling. The old man, who did not smile often, was smiling.

"Good," the old man said.

"Good?"

"Good. You should go home. You should talk to your wife."

"I —"

"Go home, Shirase. Talk to your wife. Tell her what you just told him. She deserves to hear it."

I looked at the old man. I looked at Yamamoto, who was looking at his rice with the expression of a man who wished he was somewhere else. I

looked at the old man again.

"Okay," I said.

"Okay."

I went home.

Akari was in the kitchen. She was making dinner. She was wearing the apron, the one with the small flowers. She was humming. She was — she was Akari. She was my wife. She was the most beautiful woman in Niigata Prefecture.

She looked up when I came in. She saw my face. She stopped humming.

"Shirase. What's wrong?"

"I —"

"What happened? You look —"

"I yelled at the surveyor."

She stared at me.

"You what?"

"I yelled at the surveyor. In the temple. I — I told him you were mine. I told him I could kill him. I — I was — Akari, I was — "

I stopped. I could not say the word. I could not say *jealous*. I could not say it because saying it would make it real, and I did not want it to be real, because I was not a jealous person, because I had never been a jealous

person, because —

"You were jealous," Akari said.

She said it for me. She said the word I could not say. She said it gently, the way she said everything that mattered — flat, a little angry, a lot kind.

"I was jealous."

"You were jealous."

"I was — I was jealous. Of the surveyor. Because he held your hand. Because he said you were — because he said what he said. Because — I don't know. Because he was tall and young and he had the face and he — "

"He had the face?"

"The face. The — the face that women like. The face that — I don't know. The face."

"Shirase."

"What."

"He had the face?"

"He had the face."

"And you were jealous of the face?"

"I was jealous of the face."

"And the hand."

"And the hand."

"And the comment."

"And the comment."

Akari looked at me. She looked at me for a long time. Then she started laughing.

She laughed. She laughed the way she laughed when things were too big to do anything else — the helpless laughter, the laughter that comes from a place that is not funny but is so absurd that the only response is laughter. She laughed. She leaned against the counter. She held her stomach. She laughed.

"You," she said, between laughs. "You — the most secure person in the world. You — the person who told me, on our wedding night, that you were not a jealous person. You — the person who has never, in ten years, been jealous of anything — you yelled at a surveyor in a temple because he held my hand for too long."

"He held it for too long."

"He held it for a normal amount of time."

"He held it for too long."

"He held it for a normal amount of time, Shirase."

"He held it for too long."

"He held it for a normal amount of time. And even if he had held it for too long — even if he had held it for an hour — even if he had held it for

the rest of his life — it would not have mattered. Because I am your wife. Because I have been your wife for four years. Because I have been your person for ten. Because you are the only person I want. Because you are the only person I have ever wanted. Because — Shirase — because I love you. I love you. I love you, you absolute idiot. I love you and your stupid not-jealous face and your stupid yuri manga and your stupid burnt rice and your stupid — stupid — stupid everything. I love you. The surveyor does not matter. The surveyor never mattered. The surveyor is a surveyor. You are my wife. You are my person. You are the only person. I love you."

I stood there. In the kitchen. In the apron strings. In the smell of dinner. I stood there and I looked at her and I felt the jealousy — the jealousy I had not known I was capable of, the jealousy I had been building for three days, the jealousy that had made me yell at a surveyor in a temple — I felt it go. I felt it leave. I felt it — I don't know. I felt it become something else. Something smaller. Something that was not jealousy but was — was love. Was the love that had been under the jealousy all along. Was the love that had been there for ten years. Was the love that was there now.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't apologize."

"I'm sorry I yelled at the surveyor."

"Don't apologize for yelling at the surveyor. The surveyor was — " She paused. She considered. "The surveyor was, in fact, a little too friendly."

"He was."

"He was."

"He was too friendly."

"He was too friendly. And you yelled at him. In a temple. In front of the old man. And the old man smiled. And you came home. And you told me. And I laughed. And now — now —"

"Now?"

"Now you should come here."

I went to her. She put her arms around me. She held me. She held me the way she held me when I needed to be held — firmly, completely, with the stubbornness that meant she was not going to let go.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too."

"I love you, jealous idiot."

"I love you too, laughing idiot."

"Jealous."

"Not jealous."

"Jealous."

"Not jealous. I was — I was protecting my interests."

"You were jealous."

"I was protecting my interests."

"You were jealous."

"Fine. I was jealous. Once. Once in ten years. I was jealous once. It will not happen again."

"It will absolutely happen again."

"It will not."

"It will. And I will laugh. And you will yell at someone. And I will laugh. And you will come home. And I will hold you. And that will be — that will be the thing. That will be our thing. The jealousy thing. The yelling-at-surveyors thing. The — "

"I do not want this to be our thing."

"It is our thing now."

"I do not want it."

"Too late. It's our thing."

"I hate you."

"You tolerate me."

"It is not the same thing."

"It is the same thing."

"It is not —"

I stopped. She was laughing again. I was — I was almost laughing. The jealousy was gone. The absurdity was there. The absurdity of me, in a temple, threatening a surveyor. The absurdity of me, in a kitchen, being

held by my wife. The absurdity of everything.

I started laughing.

We laughed, in the kitchen, in the evening, in the smell of dinner. We laughed until Hana came in and said, "Mama funny," and we laughed more. We laughed until Tanaka Kenji knocked on the door and asked if everything was okay, because he had heard the laughing from his room and was concerned. We laughed until the old man, walking by on his evening patrol, stopped at the gate and shook his head and muttered something about young people.

We laughed.

We laughed because we were alive, and we were married, and we were jealous, and we were not jealous, and we were stubborn, and we were here, and we were — we were us.

We were us.

That was the thing.

That was the only thing.

We were us.

After Story VI — The Rainy Day

(Akari)

It rained for three days in July.

Not a typhoon. Not a storm. Just rain. The kind of rain that comes in the summer in the mountains, the steady, patient, all-day rain that turns the world grey and wet and quiet. The kind of rain that makes you stay inside. The kind of rain that makes you — I don't know. The kind of rain that makes you do things you would not otherwise do.

The first day was fine. The first day we did the things we normally did. Shirase played her game. I did my nails. Hana played with Boss, which mostly consisted of Hana trying to pet Boss and Boss running away and Hana chasing and Boss hiding under the bed and Hana sitting next to the bed and waiting. This went on for hours. Neither of them got tired of it. Tanaka Kenji broadcast. The old man patrolled, under an umbrella, because the old man did not let rain stop him from anything.

The second day was harder. The second day, Hana got bored. Hana at three was — Hana at three was a force. Hana at three was the kind of child who, when bored, did not whine or complain or ask for things. Hana at three just — found things to do. The things Hana found to do were not always things that we wanted Hana to find to do.

On the second day, Hana found the miso.

She found the miso in the kitchen, while I was in the other room. She found the miso and she opened it and she — I don't know what she was trying to do. I don't think she knew what she was trying to do. She was

three. She was bored. She had found a thing. She had decided to interact with the thing.

I came into the kitchen to find Hana covered in miso. Miso on her face. Miso in her hair. Miso on her clothes. Miso on the floor. Miso on the counter. Miso on the wall, somehow. Miso — I don't know how — miso on the ceiling. There was miso on the ceiling. I did not know how this was physically possible. I did not know how a three-year-old, even a stubborn three-year-old, even our three-year-old, could get miso on the ceiling. But there it was. Miso. On the ceiling.

Hana looked at me. She was holding the miso container, which was nearly empty. She was smiling. The wide, sandy, miso-covered smile of a child who has done a thing and is proud of the thing.

"Mama," she said. "I made dinner."

I looked at her. I looked at the kitchen. I looked at the miso on the ceiling. I took a breath.

"You made dinner," I said.

"I made dinner."

"For who?"

"For everyone. For you. For Mama. For Tanaka-san. For Boss."

"Boss doesn't eat miso."

"Boss should eat miso."

"Boss should not eat miso."

"Boss should eat miso because Boss is grumpy and miso is good and good food makes you not grumpy."

"That's — that's not how cats work, Hana."

"How do cats work?"

"Cats work however they want."

"That's not fair."

"No. It's not."

I cleaned her up. I cleaned the kitchen up. I cleaned the ceiling, which required a stepstool and a rag and about fifteen minutes of my life that I would never get back. I did not yell. I did not get angry. I was — I was impressed, in a way. The ceiling. I was impressed by the ceiling.

When Shirase came home from the school — the school had not been cancelled, because the school was indoors and the rain did not matter — I told her about the miso. She listened. She nodded. She went into the kitchen. She looked at the ceiling, which was now clean but still slightly damp. She looked at me.

"The ceiling," she said.

"The ceiling."

"How?"

"I don't know."

"She's three."

"She's three."

"Three-year-olds should not be able to get miso on the ceiling."

"I know."

"She's going to be a problem."

"She's already a problem."

"She's our problem."

"She's our problem."

"She's our favorite problem."

"She's our only problem."

"She's our favorite and our only."

We looked at each other. We both started laughing. The laughter of parents. The laughter of people who have just cleaned miso off a ceiling and are choosing to find it funny instead of devastating.

The third day, I had an idea.

The idea came to me at 6 AM, when I woke up and looked out the window and saw that it was still raining and was going to be still raining for the rest of the day. The idea was: a fort.

A blanket fort. In the living room. For Hana.

I had not made a blanket fort since I was a child. I had not made a blanket fort since — I don't know. Since before the spreadsheet. Since before the bunker. Since before the moon. I had not made a blanket fort

in twenty years. But I remembered how. I remembered the way you draped the blankets over the chairs and the way you weighted the corners with books and the way you put pillows inside and the way you crawled in and the way the world, outside, disappeared.

I got up. I woke Shirase up. I told her the plan.

"We're making a fort," I said.

"A fort."

"A blanket fort. In the living room. For Hana."

Shirase looked at me. She looked at the time. It was 6:15 AM. She looked at me again.

"Okay," she said.

"Okay?"

"Okay. Let's make a fort."

We made the fort.

We made it before Hana woke up. We took the chairs from the kitchen table and we put them in the living room and we draped the blankets over them — the good blankets, the thick ones, the ones we had been given by the village. We weighted the corners with books — the yuri manga, the notebooks, the *Bloom Into You* volumes that we had carried from Niigata, that we had read a hundred times, that we would read a hundred more. We put pillows inside. We put the small lamp inside. We put a thermos of barley tea inside. We put rice balls inside. We made it — we made it good. We made it the kind of fort that a three-year-old would

walk into and not want to leave.

Hana woke up at 7. We brought her into the living room. We showed her the fort.

She stood at the entrance. She looked at it. She did not move. She did not speak. She was — she was processing. She was processing the existence of a thing she had never seen. A thing that was — a thing that was inside the house but was also not the house. A thing that was — a thing.

"What is it?" she said.

"It's a fort," I said.

"A fort?"

"A fort. A blanket fort. A — a place. Inside the house. A small place. Your place."

"My place?"

"Your place. You can go in. You can stay in. You can — whatever you want. It's yours."

She looked at the fort. She looked at me. She looked at Shirase. She looked at the fort again. She crouched down. She crawled in.

We did not see her for an hour.

We could hear her, inside the fort, talking to herself. Talking to the pillows. Talking to the rice balls. Talking to Boss, who had — surprisingly — followed her in, and who was, even more surprisingly, tolerating her

presence. We could hear her telling Boss a story. The story was about the moon. The story was about how the moon had fallen and then stopped and then said sorry. The story was, as far as I could tell, accurate.

Shirase and I sat on the couch and listened. We did not say anything. We did not need to. The sound of our daughter, in a blanket fort, on a rainy day, telling our story to a cat — that was enough. That was the thing. That was — I don't know. That was the after story. That was what the after story was for.

"I love you," Shirase said, quietly.

"I love you too."

"I love the fort."

"I love the fort."

"I love the miso on the ceiling."

"You don't love the miso on the ceiling."

"I love the memory of the miso on the ceiling. I love that our daughter got miso on the ceiling. I love that she was trying to make dinner. I love — I love this. I love — I don't know. I love the rainy day. I love the fort. I love the — I love — "

She stopped. She was crying. Quietly. The way she cried.

"I love that we're here," she said.

"We're here."

"I love that we're alive."

"We're alive."

"I love that we have a daughter who gets miso on the ceiling."

"We have a daughter who gets miso on the ceiling."

"I love that we have a cat who tolerates her."

"We have a cat who tolerates her."

"I love that we have a streamer in the spare room."

"We have a streamer in the spare room."

"I love that we have an old man who pours sake."

"We have an old man who pours sake."

"I love that we have a Tendo who makes chairs."

"We have a Tendo who makes chairs."

"I love that we have a village."

"We have a village."

"I love that we have — I love that we have this. I love that we have — the life. The life that — that the moon tried to take. The life that we kept. I love that we kept it. I love that we're — I love — "

She stopped. She wiped her eyes. She looked at me. She did the small smile.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too."

"I love you and the fort and the miso and the cat and the streamer and the old man and the chairs and the village and the moon."

"The moon?"

"The moon. Even the moon. The moon fell and the moon stopped and the moon said sorry and Hana forgave the moon and I — I forgive the moon too. I forgive the moon. For everything. Because — because without the moon, we wouldn't be here. Without the moon, I would have been — I don't know. In Niigata. In the apartment. On the bench. Without the moon, you wouldn't have — you wouldn't have come back. You would have come back for me, because you came back before the moon, but — I don't know. The moon made it — the moon made it — the moon made it the thing it is. The moon made it the story it is. The moon made it — I don't know. The moon made it us. And I love us. So I love the moon. Even though the moon — even though the moon was — I love the moon."

I looked at her. She was — she was crying and smiling and saying she loved the moon. She was saying she loved the thing that had tried to kill us. She was saying she loved the thing that had broken the world. She was saying she loved the thing that had — that had brought us here. To this. To the fort. To the miso on the ceiling. To the daughter telling the cat about the moon.

"You love the moon," I said.

"I love the moon."

"Even though the moon fell."

"Even though the moon fell."

"Even though the moon — the cult — the winter — the flood —"

"Even though. Even though all of it. I love the moon. Because the moon — the moon brought me here. The moon brought me to you. The moon brought me to — to this. To the fort. To Hana. To the — to the life. I love the moon because the moon gave me the life. The life that — the life that I have. With you. With Hana. With the village. With everyone. I love the moon because the moon gave me — the moon gave me — "

She stopped. She wiped her eyes. She took a breath.

"The moon gave me everything," she said.

I looked at her. I did not say anything for a long time. The rain was on the roof. The fort was in the corner. Hana was inside the fort, telling the cat about the moon. The cat was, presumably, ignoring her.

"The moon gave me everything," I said.

"The moon gave you everything."

"The moon gave me you."

"The moon gave me you."

"The moon gave me Hana."

"The moon gave me Hana."

"The moon gave me the fort."

"The moon gave me the fort."

"The moon gave me the miso on the ceiling."

"The moon gave me the miso on the ceiling."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"Okay."

We sat there. On the couch. In the rain. The fort was in the corner. Hana was in the fort. Boss was in the fort. The streamer was in his room, broadcasting, because it was Tuesday, and Tuesday was his night, even on a rainy day. The old man was at the temple, pouring sake. Tendo was in his workshop, making a chair. The village was the village. The world was the world. The moon was the moon.

We were us.

We were us, on a rainy day, in a blanket fort, with miso on the ceiling and a cat in the corner and a daughter telling stories and a wife who loved the moon.

We were us.

And that was — that was the thing.

That was the after story.

That was the whole thing.

We were us.

After Story VII — The Confession Rewrite

(Shirase)

The confession rewrite was Tanaka Kenji's idea, which should have been our second warning. (His first idea had been the beach episode, which had gone well, so we had begun to trust him. This was a mistake.)

It was a Saturday evening. We were at the temple. The usual crowd. The old man had poured sake. Tanaka Kenji had had one cup, because Tanaka Kenji had learned his limit. The children were running around. Hana was asleep on Obaa-chan's lap, because Obaa-chan had a way with Hana that none of the rest of us had, the way of a ninety-year-old woman who had raised four children and twelve grandchildren and was not, frankly, impressed by anything anymore.

Tanaka Kenji was talking. He did this — he talked, on Saturday evenings, in a way he did not talk during the week. During the week he was quiet, focused, the radio operator who said little and meant much. On Saturday evenings, with one cup of sake in him, he became — chatty. Not in a bad way. In a Tanaka Kenji way. In a way that reminded you that he had been alone for four years and was making up for it.

He was talking about confessions.

I don't know how the topic came up. I think it came up because Tendo had said something about his time in the cult — Tendo said things about his time in the cult, occasionally, in the way that people who have been through a thing say things about the thing, which is to say: carefully, in small doses, when the mood was right. Tendo had said something about

how he had confessed to the cult, how he had told them about the moon, how he had — how the confession had been a thing. A performance. A thing he had done over and over, to people who had not wanted to hear it but had pretended to.

And Tanaka Kenji had said: "Confessions are hard."

And Akari had said: "Yes."

And I had said: "Yes."

And Tanaka Kenji had said: "How did you two confess? To each other? I never heard. You never told me."

We had not told him. We had not told anyone, really. The confession — the real one, the *I love you* one — had happened in the Tanaka house, in the dark, in the week of the fever. It had been — private. It had been ours. We had not shared it.

"It was — " I started, and then I stopped. "It was —"

"It was bad," Akari said.

I looked at her. She looked at me. We both — we both knew it was bad. We had known it was bad at the time. We had known it was bad ever since. The confession had been — the confession had been the two of us, in a small house, in the dark, in the middle of the apocalypse, saying *I love you* for the first time, and it had been — it had been clumsy. It had been awkward. It had been the kind of confession that you would not put in a yuri manga. It had been the kind of confession that was real.

"It was bad," Akari said again.

"It was not bad," I said.

"It was bad. You were — you were lying on the futon. You could not move. You had not slept for eighteen days. You said *I love you* and then I kissed you and then I said *not yet* and then —"

"Then I said *I love you* again."

"You said *I love you* again. And then I started crying. And then you touched my face. And then you fell asleep. And then I cried for another hour. And then —"

"Then we never talked about it again."

"We never talked about it again."

"For years."

"For years."

"That was the confession."

"That was the confession."

Tanaka Kenji was looking at us with the expression of a man who had just been told something that was simultaneously the most beautiful and the most disappointing thing he had ever heard.

"That's it?" he said.

"That's it."

"You — you confessed while one of you was unconscious."

"I was not unconscious. I was weakened."

"You were weakened and she was crying and that was the confession."

"Yes."

"And then you never talked about it again."

"No."

"For years."

"For years."

Tanaka Kenji put down his sake cup. He looked at us. He looked at us with the expression of a man who had made a decision.

"You should redo it," he said.

We stared at him.

"Redo it," Akari said.

"Redo the confession. Do it over. Do it — I don't know. Do it properly. Do it the way it should have been done. Do it —"

"It was done properly."

"It was not done properly. It was done badly. You just said it was done badly. You should redo it. You should — you should write it out. You should — I don't know. You should prepare. You should — " He turned to the old man. "Tell them."

The old man, who had been listening with the patient expression of a man who had heard everything, looked at Tanaka Kenji. He looked at us. He considered.

"The man has a point," the old man said.

"The man does not have a point," I said.

"The man has a point," the old man said. "You two have been together for ten years. You have been married for seven. You have a daughter. You have survived the moon. And your confession was — by your own admission — bad. You should redo it. You should — " He paused. He sipped his sake. "You should give yourselves the confession you should have had."

I looked at Akari. Akari looked at me. We had the same thought, which was: *this is ridiculous.*

We also had the same thought, which was: *but maybe.*

"Fine," Akari said.

"Fine?" I said.

"Fine. We'll redo it. We'll — we'll write confessions. We'll prepare. We'll do it properly. We'll — when?"

"Next Saturday," Tanaka Kenji said. "At the temple. In front of everyone."

"In front of —"

"In front of everyone. The whole village. Like a — like a ceremony. A — a confession ceremony. You will — you will each say what you should have said, ten years ago, and you will say it properly, and we will all hear it, and it will be — I don't know. It will be a thing. A village thing. A — "

"This is the worst idea you have ever had," I said. "Worse than the beach. Worse than —"

"Worse than the cat?"

"I am not comparing it to the cat. The cat is a separate issue."

"The cat is not a separate issue. The cat is — "

"The cat is a separate issue."

"The cat —"

"The cat is a separate issue, Tanaka Kenji."

He stopped. He looked at me. He looked at Akari. He looked at the old man. The old man was smiling. The old man was — the old man was enjoying this.

"Next Saturday," the old man said. "At the temple. Confessions. Be prepared."

We prepared.

We prepared separately, because Tanaka Kenji had insisted that the confessions be — that they be surprises. That we not tell each other what we were going to say. That we write them in secret, the way I had written the curry recipe in secret, the way Akari had made the dress in secret. That we write them and not show them and say them, next Saturday, in front of everyone.

I wrote mine in the notebook. I wrote it at night, in the dark, in the lamp light, while Akari slept. I wrote it and I rewrote it and I rewrote it

again. I wrote it the way I wrote everything — badly, stubbornly, with the wrong words in the wrong order.

I will not tell you what I wrote. I will tell you only that it was — that it was the thing. That it was the thing I should have said, ten years ago, on the futon, in the dark. That it was the thing I had been trying to say, in a hundred small ways, for ten years. That it was the thing.

Saturday came. The temple. The whole village. The old man presiding. Tanaka Kenji with his radio, because Tanaka Kenji was going to broadcast it, because Tanaka Kenji had decided that the world needed to hear this, and we had not been able to talk him out of it.

Akari went first.

She stood at the front of the temple. She was wearing the dress — the dark blue dress with the white waves. She had her hair down. She had her nails done — dark red, with the gold dots. She was — she was beautiful. She was always beautiful. She was especially beautiful now, in the dress, in the temple, in front of everyone, with the words she had written in her hand.

She looked at me.

"Shirase," she said.

"Yeah."

"I wrote this. I wrote it at night, while you were sleeping. I wrote it and I rewrote it and I rewrote it again. I wrote it the way I write everything — in the notebook, with the neat handwriting, with the — I don't know. With the trying. I wrote it because Tanaka Kenji told us to redo the confession,

and I thought he was an idiot, and I told him he was an idiot, and then I went home and I wrote it anyway, because — because he was right. He was right. The confession we had was bad. It was real. But it was bad. And you deserved — you deserved a good one. You deserved the — the words. The — the — "

She stopped. She looked at the paper. She looked at me. She put the paper down.

"I'm not going to read it," she said.

I stared at her. "What?"

"I'm not going to read it. I wrote it. I rewrote it. I — I have it. But I'm not going to read it. Because — because the words I wrote are not the words. The words I wrote are — they're good words. They're the right words. But they're not — they're not the words. The words are — I don't know. The words are —"

She stopped. She looked at me. The whole temple was looking at us. The old man. Obaa-chan. Tendo. Tanaka Kenji. The children. Hana, who had woken up and was watching with the focus of a three-year-old who sensed that something important was happening. The whole village.

"The words are these," Akari said. "I love you. I have loved you since the bench. Since the melon pan. Since the first morning you came back. I have loved you through the moon, and the cult, and the flood, and the winter, and the radio, and the streamer, and the cooking contest, and the dress, and the jealousy, and the miso on the ceiling, and the fort, and — and everything. I have loved you through all of it. I will love you through all of it. I will love you for as long as I am alive. And I am going to be alive

for a long time. Because I am stubborn. Because I learned it from you. Because — I don't know. Because you are the person who taught me that being stubborn is love. That being there is love. That being — that being there, day after day, is the love. That the love is not the — the big things. The love is the — the small things. The rice. The miso. The tea. The dishes. The nails. The yuri manga. The — the arguing. The being there. The being there is the love. You taught me that. You — you, on the bench, with the dead eyes, you taught me that. And I — I love you. I love you. I love you. That's the confession. That's — that's the whole confession. I love you."

She stopped.

The temple was quiet.

I was crying. I had been crying since *since the bench*. I was crying the way I cried — quietly, the tears, the not-wiping. I was crying because she had not read the paper. I was crying because the words she had said were better than any words she could have written. I was crying because she was right — the confession we had had was bad, and this one was good, and this one was the one we should have had, and we were having it now, ten years late, in a temple, in front of everyone, and it was — it was the thing.

It was the thing.

It was your turn, the old man said.

I stood up. I went to the front. I stood where Akari had stood. I looked at her. She was — she was crying too. The way she cried. The way I had taught her to cry, by crying first, by showing her that crying was allowed.

I had the notebook. I had the words I had written. I looked at the notebook. I looked at Akari. I put the notebook down.

"I'm not going to read it either," I said.

Tanaka Kenji made a sound. I think it was a sob.

"I wrote it," I said. "I wrote it at night, while you were sleeping. I wrote it the way I write everything — badly, with the wrong words. I wrote it because Tanaka Kenji told us to, and I thought he was an idiot, and then I went home and I wrote it anyway, because he was right. He was right. The confession we had was real. But it was bad. And you deserved a good one. You deserved —"

I stopped. I looked at Akari. I looked at the temple. I looked at Hana, who was watching. I looked at the moon, through the window, huge and silver and still.

"The words are these," I said. "I love you. I have loved you since you sat down. Since you gave me the cardigan. Since you came back. I did not — I did not know I could be loved. I did not think I was allowed. I had been — I had been on a bench. I had been — for years. For my whole life. I had been the person who was not allowed. And then you sat down. And you gave me the cardigan. And you came back. And you — you kept coming back. And I — I did not believe you. For years. I did not believe you would keep coming back. I did not believe I was worth coming back for. And you came back anyway. You came back every day. You came back with onigiri and manga and shampoo and — and patience. And you taught me. You taught me that I was allowed. You taught me that I was worth it. You taught me that being loved was — was a thing that could happen to me.

That it was not — that it was not for other people. That it was for me. And I — I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you the way I love the rice and the miso and the tea and the dishes and the nails and the yuri manga and the arguing. I love you the way I love the being there. The being there is the love. You taught me that. I love you. That's the confession. That's — that's the whole confession. I love you."

I stopped.

The temple was quiet.

Then Tanaka Kenji started clapping. And then the old man started clapping. And then Obaa-chan started clapping. And then Tendo. And then the children. And then Hana, who clapped because everyone else was clapping. And then the whole village was clapping, and we were standing there, at the front of the temple, in front of everyone, and we were crying, and we were laughing, and we were — we were us.

We were us.

Tanaka Kenji broadcast the whole thing. He broadcast it on Tuesday. He told his listeners — all of them, however many there were now — that two women in a village in the mountains had redone their confession, ten years late, in front of the whole village, and it had been — he said, his voice cracking — it had been the most beautiful thing he had ever heard. He said this on the radio. He cried on the radio. He cried, on the radio, in front of all his listeners, and he did not care.

We did not read the papers.

We kept the papers. We put them in the drawer, with the cat card and

the photograph of the wedding and the recipe for the old man's mother's curry. We put them in the drawer because they were — they were the thing we had written, the thing we had prepared, the thing we had decided not to say. They were the not-said. They were the — I don't know. They were the version that was not the version. They were the words that were good but were not the words. They were ours. We kept them.

But the words we said — the words we said in the temple, in front of everyone, the words that were not on the paper — those words were — those words were the thing.

Those words were the confession.

Those words were the one we should have had.

Ten years late. But we had it.

We had it.

And the temple was full of people clapping, and the moon was through the window, and we were crying, and we were laughing, and we were us, and we were — we were the after story. We were the thing that came after. We were the thing that the moon had not been able to take. We were the thing that we had kept.

We were the love.

We were the love that was the being there.

We were the love.

And we were — we were going to keep being the love.

For as long as we were alive.

And we were going to be alive for a long time.

Because we were stubborn.

Because we were the most stubborn people in the history of Niigata Prefecture.

Because we were us.

Because we were us.

Because we were us.

After Story VIII — The Final Tuesday

(Shirase)

This is the last chapter.

I am writing this on a Tuesday. It is evening. The moon is up. The moon is always up. The moon is huge and silver and still, the way it has been for ten years, the way it will be for a thousand years, the way it will be for longer than any of us will be alive.

I am on the porch of the Tanaka house.

Akari is inside. She is doing her nails. Tonight the nails are pale pink, with tiny white flowers. She has been doing them for an hour. She will do them for another hour. The nails are hers. The nails have always been hers. The nails will always be hers.

Hana is asleep. She went down an hour ago. She is three. She is the most stubborn child I have ever met, and I have met Akari, and I have met myself. She is — she is ours. She is the proof. She is the thing we made, together, in the world after the moon. She is the thing that the moon did not take.

Tanaka Kenji is in his room. It is Tuesday. Tuesday is his broadcast night. He is on the air right now, talking to — I don't know how many listeners. Hundreds. Maybe more. He is telling them about the week. He is telling them about the village. He is telling them about Boss. He is telling them about us.

He is telling them about this.

He doesn't know he's telling them about this. He doesn't know I'm writing this. He doesn't know that this is — I don't know. He doesn't know that this is the last chapter. He doesn't know that this is the end.

I don't know that this is the end either. I don't think there is an end. I think the story just — goes on. I think the story is the morning, and the afternoon, and the evening, and the night, and the next morning, and the next afternoon, and the next — I think the story is the being there. I think the story is the rice, and the miso, and the tea, and the dishes, and the nails, and the yuri manga, and the arguing. I think the story is the being there. I think the being there is the story.

But I am writing this anyway. I am writing this because — because I want to. Because the notebook is here, and the pen is here, and the porch is here, and the evening is here, and the moon is here, and I am here. I am writing this because I am here. I am writing this because being here is the thing. I am writing this because — I don't know. Because the writing is the being there. Because the writing is the way I am there, for whoever reads this, the way Akari was there for me, on the bench, with the cardigan.

I am writing this for you.

I don't know who you are. I don't know if you are real. I don't know if anyone will ever read this. Maybe Tanaka Kenji will broadcast it, and someone will hear it, and someone will write it down, and someone will put it in a book, and someone will read it. Maybe nobody will. Maybe this notebook will sit in a drawer in the Tanaka house, next to the cat card and the wedding photograph and the curry recipe and the confession papers, and nobody will ever read it.

It doesn't matter.

I am writing it anyway. I am writing it because writing it is the thing. I am writing it because — because the moon fell, and the moon stopped, and the moon said sorry, and we are still here. I am writing it because we are still here. I am writing it because being here is the story. I am writing it because being here is the only story. I am writing it because — I don't know. I am writing it because I am stubborn, and stubborn people write things down, and I am stubborn, and this is the thing I am writing.

I am writing this:

We are alive.

We are alive, and we are here, and we are in the Tanaka house, in the village, in the mountains, under the moon. We are alive, and we are stubborn, and we are — we are us. We are the two women in the mountains who put up with each other. We are the two women who survived the moon. We are the two women who fell in love at the end of the world and kept being in love after the world did not end.

We are us.

I am writing this for you, whoever you are, wherever you are, whenever you are. I am writing this for you because — because you are reading this. And if you are reading this, you are alive. And if you are alive, you are here. And if you are here, you are — I don't know. You are the thing. You are the reason. You are the person I am writing for. You are the person Akari sat down on the bench for. You are the person who gave the cardigan. You are the person who came back.

You are the person who came back.

You came back.

You came back, and you are here, and you are reading this, and the moon is — I don't know where the moon is for you. The moon might be falling. The moon might have stopped. The moon might be just the moon. I don't know. But the moon is there. The moon is there, and you are here, and we are — we are here too, in this notebook, in this story, in this — I don't know. In this thing.

We are here with you.

I want to tell you something. I want to tell you the thing that I have learned, in the ten years since the moon, in the years since the bench, in the years since Akari. I want to tell you the thing.

The thing is this:

Being there is enough.

Being there is the love. Being there is the story. Being there is the — I don't know. Being there is the thing. The only thing. The being there. The showing up. The coming back. The — the not leaving. The being there.

Akari taught me that. Akari taught me that by sitting down. Akari taught me that by giving me her cardigan. Akari taught me that by coming back. Akari taught me that by — by being there. Day after day. Year after year. Through the moon, and the cult, and the flood, and the winter, and the radio, and the streamer, and the cooking contest, and the dress, and the jealousy, and the miso on the ceiling, and the fort, and the confession, and — and everything. Through everything. Akari was there.

And I learned. I learned to be there too. I learned to be there for her. I learned to be there for Hana. I learned to be there for the village. I learned to be there for Tanaka Kenji. I learned to be there for Tendo. I learned to be there for the old man. I learned to be there for Obaa-chan. I learned to be there for Boss, although Boss did not want me to be there for him, because Boss was Boss and Boss did not want anyone to be there for him.

I learned to be there.

And being there was — being there was the thing.

Being there was the love.

Being there was the story.

Being there was the — the whole thing.

I want to tell you this because — because you might need to hear it. You might be on a bench. You might be in the dark. You might be in the nothing. You might be — I don't know. You might be wherever I was, ten years ago, before Akari sat down. You might be there.

And I want to tell you: someone will sit down.

Someone will sit down next to you. Someone will give you the cardigan. Someone will come back. Someone will — I don't know. Someone will be there. It might not be today. It might not be tomorrow. It might be — I don't know. But someone will be there. Someone will come.

And if no one comes — and this is the other thing, the harder thing, the thing I learned on the bench — if no one comes, you be there. You be

there for yourself. You be there the way Akari was there for me. You be there the way I learned to be there for her. You be there. You sit down next to yourself. You give yourself the cardigan. You come back. You be there.

Being there is enough.

Being there is the thing.

Being there is the love.

I am going to stop writing now. Not because the story is over. The story is not over. The story will never be over. The story is the morning, and the morning will come, and Akari will wake up, and I will make rice, and we will eat, and we will argue about the dishes, and we will be there, and the story will go on. The story will go on for as long as we are alive. And we are going to be alive for a long time.

I am going to stop writing because the evening is here, and the moon is up, and Akari is inside, and Hana is asleep, and Tanaka Kenji is on the radio, and the village is quiet, and the world is okay.

I am going to stop writing because I am going to go inside. I am going to put the notebook down. I am going to go to Akari. I am going to sit next to her. I am going to watch her do her nails. I am going to — I don't know. I am going to be there.

I am going to be there.

That's the thing.

That's the whole thing.

That's the story.

Being there.

I am going to be there.

For as long as I am alive.

And I am going to be alive for a long time.

Because I am stubborn.

Because I learned it from her.

Because she sat down.

Because she gave me the cardigan.

Because she came back.

Because she was there.

Because being there is the love.

Because being there is the story.

Because being there is — everything.

Good night.

Good night, Akari.

Good night, Hana.

Good night, Tanaka Kenji.

Good night, Boss.

Good night, old man.

Good night, Obaa-chan.

Good night, Tendo.

Good night, village.

Good night, moon.

Good night, whoever you are.

Good night.

We are here.

We are alive.

We are us.

Good night.

— Shirase

Sakae, Niigata Ten years after the moon

The moon said sorry.

We forgave it.

We are still here.

Good night.

Afterword

This story was written as a one-shot: a complete light novel in a single volume. It is the story of two stubborn girls who refused to let the moon, or the world, or themselves, take from them the one thing they had decided to keep.

It is dedicated to every person who has ever sat on a park bench at one in the morning with dead eyes, waiting for something to happen. Something will happen. It may be small. It may be a melon pan. It may be a stranger with a cardigan. It will be enough.

It is dedicated, also, to the moon — for staying where it was put, eventually.

And to the streamer in Hokkaido, who finally cleared the dungeon. We're proud of you.

— F.S. & S.A.
Sakae, Niigata
Five years after perigee